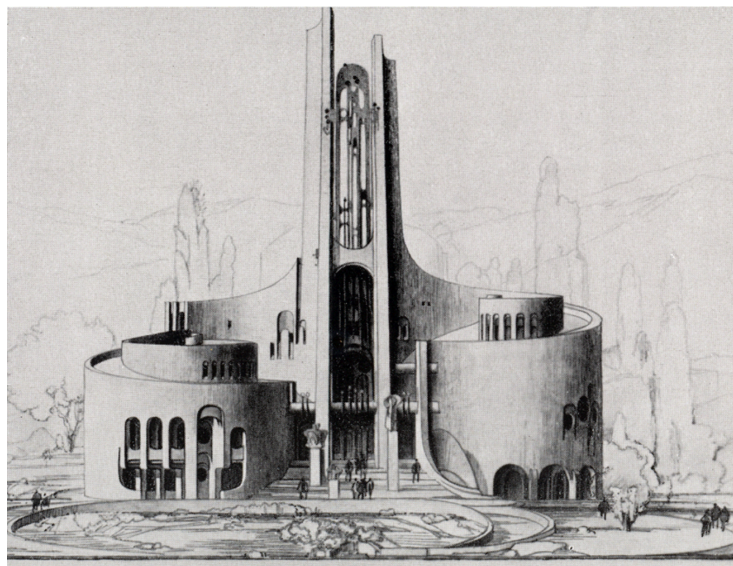


**SOCIALIST IN FORM
NATIONAL IN CONTENT:**
preserving late Soviet culture at
Tbilisi Palace of Rituals



Angela Wheeler

Advisor Jorge Otero-Pailos
Readers Xenia Vytuleva and Jennifer Gray

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Abstract

The final decades of the Soviet Union are widely referred to as “The Era of Stagnation,” and yet this period also produced some of the most innovative Soviet architecture since the heady avant-garde days of the Revolution. Victor Jorbenadze’s 1985 Palace of Rituals in Tbilisi is an outstanding example of the genre: extravagant and otherworldly, its swirling facade might be fresh in from Las Vegas, if not from the cover of *Galaxy Science Fiction*. The Palace embodies not only an aesthetic paradox, but a cultural one: a cathedral in an atheist land, a lavish commission in a decade of economic torpor, and a dynamic synthesis of local and international influences from behind the Iron Curtain.

These seeming contradictions oblige us to rethink the Soviet experience, postmodernism as both a style and cultural condition, and the assumed binary between preserving old buildings and designing new ones. Amid Leonid Brezhnev’s new ideology of “developed socialism,” late Soviet architects—in ways both unexpected and underappreciated—engaged with a nascent preservation sensibility within the Soviet Union. In a dramatic departure from the modernist aesthetics of the 1960s, which deliberately ignored local vernacular traditions, architects like Jorbenadze explored designs “national in form” (sensitive to local historic fabric) but also “socialist in content” (reflective of Soviet values). The result was a dynamic, historically-inflected postmodern architecture that emerged from the cultural logic of late socialism.

Today, however, the very buildings intended to celebrate Georgian heritage face their own preservation threat: they do not satisfy Georgia’s new national narrative, which prefers to idealize a pre-Soviet past or trumpet a post-Soviet future. Too young to be recognized for their historic value and tainted by association with the “Soviet Empire,” late Soviet architecture faces decay, demolition, or ham-fisted modification. Not only are the buildings dismissed, but so is their approach to design, which balanced bold innovation with sensitivity to local tradition. Contemporary Georgian architects, public officials, and planners have reverted to a binary: constructing either pastiche historic architecture, or new designs no more attentive to local fabric than the reviled Soviet mass housing they replace. By preserving the legacy of late Soviet architecture, we preserve an alternative to these two extremes, which stands to benefit architecture new and old in Georgia.

Acknowledgments

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This thesis represents not only my work, but also the efforts of those committed to preserving the history of Soviet Georgia in all its formidable complexity. I would like to thank David Bostanashvili and Levan Kalandarishvili for their assistance in accessing rare primary source materials; Claire Pogue Kaiser for sharing and discussing her research; and Victor Jorbenadze's colleagues and friends who were so generous with their memories: Rolf Gross, Vazha Orbeladze, Keto Kobakhidze, and Zurab Nijaradze. Research travel for this project would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of the Harriman Institute for Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies.

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Perhaps Jorbenadze himself said it best: "Fortunately or unfortunately, I always had friends who were older than me and they left this world before me."

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Introduction



1. The Palace of Rituals in 1985

Rising from the banks of the Mtkvari River, Tbilisi's Palace of Rituals dominates the landscape like an enormous abstract sculpture. Although built in 1984 under Soviet rule by a local architect, Victor Jorbenadze, it draws on influences as diverse as Georgian ecclesiastical architecture, German avant-garde expressionism, and midcentury Corbusier. This "wedding palace" was intended to imbue wedding rituals with ceremonial splendor, socialist values, and a sense of continuity with Georgian traditions. It is, at first glance, the wrong building in the wrong place at the wrong time: a cathedral in an atheist land, a Soviet celebration of Georgian national heritage, a cultural innovation in an era remembered largely for stagnation.

In fact, Tbilisi's Wedding Palace only seems like an anachronism because architectural discourse has yet to develop an adequate conceptual framework for the ways in which architectural history unfolded behind the Iron Curtain after Stalin. Accordingly, it is easy to miss the Palace's historical significance. Despite growing public and professional interest in the distinctive architecture of the late Soviet period, this stylistic sensibility lacks even a name to differentiate it from the midcentury modernism to which it was reacting.¹ An emerging body of scholarship, however, has begun to describe the architecture that developed in the socialist Eastern Bloc during the 1970s and 1980s as postmodern—a seeming oxymoron in light of theorizing that envisions postmodernism as a product of capitalism.² The existence of a late socialist postmodernism explains not only how the Wedding Palace emerged aesthetically, but why it is significant to Georgian and Soviet history—a history that now complicates its preservation in the post-Soviet context.

But precisely because of their Soviet origins, the aging structures of late Soviet postmodernism point to broader issues facing the preservation of ideologically charged architecture. The collapse of the Soviet empire has left the

¹ See Frédéric Chaubin's book *CCCP: Cosmic Communist Constructions Photographed* (Taschen, 2012) and the Vienna Centre of Architecture's *Local Modernities* research project, exhibited as "Trespassing Modernities" (SALT Galata Istanbul, 2013) and published as *Soviet Modernism 1955-1991: Unknown Stories* (Park Books, 2013)

² Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. New York: Verso, 1991.

many such buildings without a natural preservation constituency. They are, in essence, historical orphans, built under a banished regime and so now surrounded by those who spurn the very experience that brought the architecture into being. Tbilisi's Wedding Palace embodies this dilemma. That it was designed by a Georgian architect and incorporates Georgian vernacular forms makes it no less Soviet, a problem in a country busily constructing a post-independence national narrative that disowns its own Soviet past.

With that in mind, this study addresses not only the architecture, but the political climate that produced it. If western postmodernism is the product of the cultural logic of late capitalism, this "late socialist postmodernism" emerged from the cultural logic of late socialism. Previously, in the early Soviet period, architects had been exhorted to produce designs that were "national in form, socialist in content"—but, under Leonid Brezhnev, that content became "developed socialism," a marked change from the revolutionary rhetoric of previous administrations.³ Rather than striving for a future utopia, developed socialism celebrated the present and made engagement with the past (even national pasts) ideologically acceptable. Cold War victory was no longer to be measured by military advances or even by surpassing the West consumer object for consumer object, kitchen-debate style. Triumph, argued Soviet ideologues,

³ Sandle, M. (2002). *Brezhnev and Developed Socialism: The Ideology of Zastoi? Brezhnev Reconsidered*. E. Bacon. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 166.

would come instead from offering a superior “quality of life.” This decidedly subjective notion focused not on consumer durables but life’s intangibles, particularly cultural activities. It was to be promoted through the provision of public amenities: a socialism of Black Sea holidays, youth camps, and ethnographic dance troupes. Developed socialism fostered a cosmopolitan atmosphere, patronized national arts and culture, and gave rise to the Soviet Union’s first sustained efforts at preserving of historic districts. Cultural institutions proliferated, often requiring not simply more buildings but also a fresh architecture suitable for the new ideology—architecture like Victor Jorbenadze’s.

With the communist future a thing of the past, developed socialism fostered and legitimated historicism in ways that redirected Soviet art from utopia.⁴ This historical consciousness provided architects with a new—and now officially approved—stylistic idiom inspired by local and traditional architecture. Late Soviet architects increasingly broke with the international modernism endorsed under Khrushchev and produced a new, postmodern style animated by the dynamics of developed socialism.

Developed socialism’s impact on architecture is revealed with particular clarity in wedding palaces, a typology almost entirely endemic to socialism. In

⁴ Erjavec, A. (2003). “Introduction.” *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art Under Late Socialism*. ed. A. Erjavec. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 20.

the 1960s, wedding palaces were modest structures that functioned primarily as a tool for atheist propaganda—aiming to bring the milestones of life in line with the dogma of the state while still acknowledging the public taste for ritual.

Under developed socialism, however, wedding palace architects were able to experiment in ways they had not been able to since the avant-garde heyday of the 1920s. Architects (who now often worked as preservationists) freely mined local and international traditions, and their work was often judged by its ability to reinvent tradition rather than to revive it or break from it entirely.

Under developed socialism, architects engaged in a debate familiar to contemporary preservationists: how to design innovative new architecture that remained sensitive to the past. Tbilisi's Palace of Rituals—with its celebration of historic Georgian architecture, eclectic international influences, and origins in Soviet ideology—embodies the cosmopolitanism of the era and provides an instructive example for Georgian architects today. Unfortunately, these very qualities are what pose a challenge to preserving Soviet architecture in the Republic of Georgia. Intended to serve a constituency that was both Soviet and Georgian, the Wedding Palace has no place in a post-Soviet national narrative constructed around the separation of those two identities. With major contemporary cultural institutions portraying the entire Soviet period as an

“occupation,” Soviet architecture, even if designed by Georgians to reflect Georgian heritage, are tainted by association.⁵

* * *

Given that archival sources from the period are neither translated nor digitized, research specific to the building and architect—along with site visits and photography—was conducted in Georgia in summer 2015. In November 2015, the author also interviewed Dr. Rolf Gross, a German-American physicist who befriended Jorbenadze during two state-sponsored science exchange visits to Tbilisi in 1980 and 1984. As these visits fortuitously coincided with the construction of the Wedding Palace, Dr. Gross was able to discuss the design and bureaucratic process with Jorbenadze, and his photos represent the only high-quality documentation of both early and late construction. Further archival research and interviews with Jorbenadze’s former colleagues were completed in January 2016. Interviewees generously provided additional primary sources from their private collections. To provide greater context regarding late Soviet architectural discourse, the author reviewed all copies of *Arkhitectura SSSR*⁶

⁵ The Museum of Soviet Occupation, drawing liberally on the Holocaust museum genre, was opened in 2006 with support from Saakashvili’s presidential “extra-budgetary fund.”
< http://museum.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=53>

⁶ *Architecture of the USSR* (published in Russian from 1933 to 1991, with some interruption) was the most widely distributed Soviet publication dedicated to architecture, planning, and design theory.

from 1976 to 1990 at Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library at Columbia University.

Chapter 1 will make a case for the historical significance of Tbilisi's Palace of Rituals, examining the political climate of "developed socialism" in which it emerged. The Palace, and many other buildings of its era, have only recently come to the attention of architectural historians, and are frequent subjects of public and professional misconceptions. This chapter will explore how the seeming paradoxes of the Palace are actually products of the complex cultural logic of late socialism.

Chapter 2 will delve into late Soviet architectural discourse in further detail, including critical reception of the Palace. Analyzing the concerns of Jorbenadze and his colleagues reveals a preoccupation with historic context (many architects of the period also worked as preservationists at the same time they were developing new projects) and extensive professional debate surrounding what preservationists today refer to as "infill design": the sensitive incorporation of new architecture into historic environments. Not only does the existence of such a debate upend contemporary notions of Soviet architecture as context-blind, but it also provides an instructive lesson for architecture in Georgia today, which struggles to find a middle ground between historical pastiche and incompatible new construction.

Chapter 3 will provide an overview of the contemporary preservation climate in Georgia, and its implications for buildings old and new. Rather than the usual post-Soviet specter of funding shortages, the greatest challenge to preserving Georgian architecture (whether a traditional Old Tbilisi house from 1895 or the Palace of Rituals from 1985) is largely a matter of identity. The chapter will focus on the afterlife of late Soviet buildings, and how the very reasons for their significance are what put them in conflict with contemporary Georgia's post-Soviet national narrative.

The Palace of Rituals embodies an overlooked period in Soviet and Georgian history when architects engaged in lively debate about the effects of their new designs on the existing built environment. While the buildings of its era are historically and aesthetically significant, this thesis contends that their primary value lies in their capacity to revive discussion about the role of every architect as a preservationist. Jorbenadze's designs are a testament to the idea that new architecture can be historically informed without sacrificing bold innovation, a lesson that would serve all Georgian architecture well.

1.

The Palace as Document: Historical Significance

“Is it possible to build real socialism in Yerevan?”

“Yes, but better in Georgia.”

Radio Yerevan Q&A⁷

That the late Soviet “Era of Stagnation” produced dynamic, ideologically engaged yet culturally specific institutions like Tbilisi’s Palace of Rituals should prompt a reexamination of the interrelated cultural and political forces at work in the late Soviet period. As an institution, the Palace was part of a campaign to eradicate what Soviet authorities deemed “harmful traditions,”⁸ like church weddings. Wedding palaces, provided by local governments were offered as a state-approved secular alternative, but changing traditions was not simply a matter of replacing local customs with standardized buildings and homogenized procedures handed down from Moscow. The history of Tbilisi’s Palace of Rituals illustrates how the political climate of “developed socialism” shifted the function of wedding palaces from tools of atheist propaganda to expressions of national culture.

⁷ Radio Yerevan, popular across the Eastern Bloc from the 1960s, was known for its Q&A format jokes about the realities of “real” socialism. This joke is from Benedikt Sarnov’s *Our Soviet Newspeak: A Short Encyclopedia of Real Socialism* (2002, in Russian).

⁸ Pogue Kaiser, C. (2015). *Lived Nationality: Policy and Practice in Soviet Georgia, 1945-1978*. History PhD. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, pp. 240.

Socialism under Brezhnev actively encouraged expressions of national culture through art and architecture. This upends the common Cold War binary that distorts contemporary understandings of the late Soviet experience, reducing any expression of local culture to a dynamic of totalitarian state oppression and national dissidence.⁹ Public culture was, in fact, a matter of negotiation between center and periphery.

This chapter will examine the ways in which the Palace of Rituals emerged from Soviet policies, and how ritual architecture as a typology was particularly suited for dramatic architectural experiment. As historian Owen Hatherley observes, "This was not supposed to be an economy of great one-offs, but one of mass production of durable goods whose individuality or 'specialness' was irrelevant. That conflicts here with the need to provide a 'special' space for collective or ritual experience, providing some of the richest 'pure' architecture in Eastern Europe, of any era."¹⁰

⁹ Platt, Kevin M.F. and Benjamin Nathans. (2011) "Socialist in Form, Indeterminate in Content: The Ins and Outs of Late Soviet Culture." *Ab Imperio*, pp. 301.

¹⁰ Hatherley, O. (2015). *Landscapes of Communism*. London: Allen Lane, pp. 149.

The Cultural Logic of Late Socialism

Brezhnev's "Developed Socialism" and Late Soviet Culture

The very existence of Tbilisi's Palace of Rituals raises questions about the ideological climate in which it was built: Why was such a lavish structure, serving largely symbolic purposes, constructed on the periphery of the Soviet Union at the twilight of its rule? How, under an avowedly atheist regime that controlled all architectural commissions and means of production, did a local architect win approval for what he described as a "cathedral"? The Palace embodies a variation of the French concept of *architecture parlante*—architecture that illustrates its use or identity.¹¹ Given that all Soviet architecture was subject to official approval, in this case, the Palace also provides information about the state it represents, and the implications of the state's policies for architecture.

The Palace of Rituals emerged in the context of "developed socialism,"¹² a period of relative stability lasting from the early 1970s through the perestroika reforms of the mid-1980s. Although the era is commonly depicted as one of stagnation, developed socialism represented a marked shift in Soviet ideology, introducing subtle but significant changes in public culture, nationality policy, and—as a consequence—in architecture. General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev

¹¹ For example, Claude Nicolas Ledoux's plan for a brothel in the shape of a phallus. Bergdoll, Barry. (1994) *Leon Vaudoyer: Historicism in the Age of Industry*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 109.

¹² Various translated as "real socialism" or the clumsy "actually existing socialism."

first referred to the Soviet Union as a “developed socialist society” in 1967—a novel term in Soviet ideological discourse, which up until that point had imagined socialism as merely a temporary step in the march towards communist utopia.¹³ How, then, could socialism be “developed,” and how could it be reconciled with previous theory? Brezhnev openly declared the policy in 1971, and dedicated significant time to elaborating on its definition in publications of Marxist theory. In a 1977 treatise, Brezhnev defines developed socialism as “a natural stage in the socio-economic maturing of the new system in the framework of the first phase of the communist formation. This, to use Lenin’s words, is the full, established socialism from which the gradual transition to communism begins.”¹⁴

This “maturing” stage had no set time frame, unlike Khrushchev’s claim at the 1961 party congress that full communism would be achieved by 1980. American political scientist Alfred Evans viewed developed socialism as a product of Brezhnev’s concern that the public would make unfavorable comparisons between “the Marxian ideal and the Soviet social reality when that date arrived,” and so he proposed “a new periodization of the Soviet experience” to make that reality ideologically acceptable.¹⁵ Developed socialism

¹³ Evans, A. (1977). “Developed Socialism in Soviet Ideology.” *Soviet Studies* 29(3), pp. 412.

¹⁴ Brezhnev, L. (1977). “A Historic Stage on the Road to Communism.” *World Marxist Review* 22(12), pp. 3.

¹⁵ Evans, A. (1977), pp. 412.

was, in many ways, a policy of inertia. Brezhnev insisted that Marx's plan for the communist transition included "not a grain of Utopia. No flights of fantasy."¹⁶ In this sense, Evans observes, "developed socialism reflects a trend probably common to any ideological movement that remains and power for a long time: the increasing identification of the ideal with the main features of actual society. As institutions become ends, goals are redefined gradually to resemble the characteristics of established structures."¹⁷

Developed socialism represented a kind of rebranding, backing away from the rhetoric of future utopia and encouraging the public, instead, to be content with the benefits of present "development." Party officials made no further claims about when, exactly, full communism would be achieved. The previous administration's promise of parity with the West in productivity, consumption, and military strength was abandoned in favor of a more subjective measurement of Soviet superiority: quality of life. Developed socialism claimed to offer a superior quality of life through the provision of public goods: free education, social housing, and cultural activities available to all.¹⁸ Despite overall economic stagnation, public funding was lavished upon museums, theatres, and other institutions of cultural leisure. Critically for architecture, this state support

¹⁶ Brezhnev, L. (1977), pp. 5.

¹⁷ Evans, A. (1977), pp. 414.

¹⁸ Shlapentokh, V. (2004). "Developed Socialism." *Encyclopedia of Russian History*. Boston: Cengage Learning. Online.

often took a nationally specific form. Ethnographic arts and preservation of regional heritage acquired new a purpose and urgency.

Nationality, in particular, played a central role in developed socialism's cultural policy. Nationalism had been recruited to the Soviet cause from the days of the revolution,¹⁹ but only under developed socialism did it become a component of "quality of life." Public discussion regarding the role of national cultures in the Soviet project became increasingly acceptable after Stalin's death, which brought an end to the widespread use of terror as a means of ensuring loyalty to central authorities.²⁰ By the early 1960s, Khrushchev had also initiated a measured process of devolution, encouraging local soviets to take greater control of their own affairs instead of relying on central planning. Brezhnev's developed socialism in the following decade went a step further, creating official "controlled spheres for the expression of non-Russian national identities."²¹

But scholars of the era argue that developed socialism needed nationality to survive as much as nationality needed developed socialism to flourish.

Comparing established socialist regimes around the world, Aleš Erjavec points

¹⁹ For a study of early Soviet ethnic policies, see Terry Martin's *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (2001, Cornell University Press).

²⁰ Pogue Kaiser, C. (2015). "Lived Nationality: Policy and Practice in Soviet Georgia, 1945-1978." PhD in History. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, pp. 201.

²¹ Hanson, S. (2006). "The Brezhnev Era." *The Cambridge History of Russia* ed. R. G. Suny. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (3): 292–315.

to an “overuse of culture as a replacement for politics,” with countries developing their own “brands” of socialism: “developed socialism” (Soviet Union), “socialism with a human face” (Czechoslovakia and Poland), “self-reliance” (Yugoslavia and North Korea), and “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” By the 1970s, the global proletarian revolution has fractured into a variety of “national” socialisms.²² Yuri Slezkine claims that the official discourse of developed socialism merely “retained the language of class as window dressing and relied on nationality to prop up the system.”²³ Accordingly, the Soviet Union’s new policy of developed socialism ideologically legitimized and financially supported architecture that looked to national traditions in ways that would break from the modernist aesthetics that had dominated under Khrushchev. Although this new aesthetic sensibility came to manifest itself in a wide variety of Soviet architecture in the 1970s and ‘80s, one typology made for an unexpectedly apt vessel for its purposes: the wedding palace.

²² Erjavec, A. (2003). “Introduction.” *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art Under Late Socialism*. ed. A. Erjavec. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 10, 12.

²³ Slezkine, Y. (1994). “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism.” *Slavic Review* 53(2), pp. 450.

Rites and Rituals

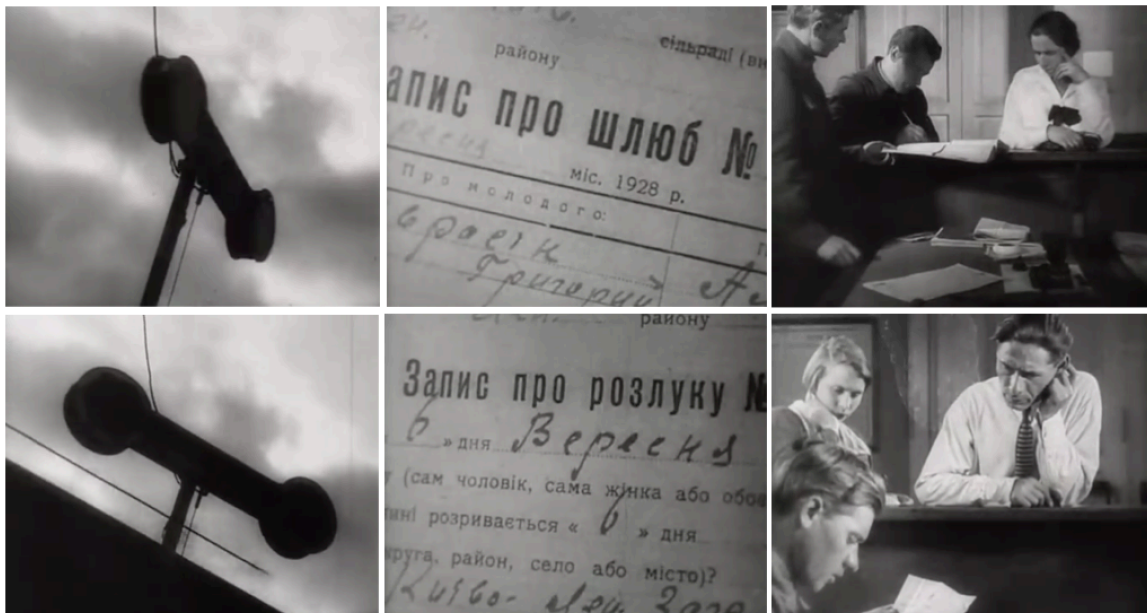
In keeping with its commitment to quality of life, developed socialism supported cultural institutions that would be accessible to all—in contrast to the capitalist West, where culture was reserved for the paying elite. Wedding palaces had emerged as an architectural typology and social institution in the 1960s, as a component of the Khrushchev administration's attempt to promote state atheism. As such, wedding palaces might seem like an unusual candidate for developed socialism's cultural investment. Paradoxically, an institution originally intended to promote a homogenized secular culture and stamp out local religious traditions became a means of celebrating national culture.

Early Soviet weddings were primarily administrative affairs, carried out in registration offices called ZAGS,²⁴ where local officials bureaucratically processed births, marriages, and deaths. A wedding (and, likewise, a divorce) was as simple as signing a form, with any other commemoration left to the couple. The ceremonies may have been unexciting, but secularization of marriage and liberalization of divorce represented the most progressive family legislation in the world at the time.²⁵ Dziga Vertov's 1929 film "Man with a Movie Camera" conveys the mixed feelings surrounding civil marriage and divorce in a

²⁴ Russian: *zapis aktov grazhdanskovo sostoyaniya*, "recording of civil acts."

²⁵ Prohibition of divorce within the Orthodox Church meant that before the Revolution, most women could not obtain a divorce even in cases of abuse. See William Moskoff's "Divorce in the USSR" in the May 1983 *Journal of Marriage and Family*, pp. 420.

scene that shows one couple registering to get married immediately followed by another registering for divorce—each “ceremony” is so perfunctory that Vertov must provide images of the marriage and divorce certificates so viewers can tell them apart. The scenes are intercut with footage of tram signal switches, and conclude with two trams meeting and parting ways as quickly and impersonally as the couples.



2. Civil marriage (above) and divorce (below) ceremonies are virtually indistinguishable in Dziga Vertov's "Man With a Movie Camera" (1929)

To counter this impersonality, many Soviet couples completed the required ZAGS registration, but followed the civil procedure with a more traditional church ceremony. Although this practice was officially condemned, Soviet authorities did not prioritize an alternative until the late 1950s, when the

space race victory of the Sputnik launch prompted a revival of scientific atheism as the religion of the Soviet Union. Anthropologist Christel Lane argues that the demand for new rituals in this period also “arose once the struggle for economic survival and the deprivations of the early postwar period had eased up, and more time and money for personal concerns were available.”²⁶

The Soviet media increasingly discussed new secular rites, and some republics even began experimenting with them, but the Khrushchev administration made no official decree regarding rituals until 1963. This lag between official mandate and public practice speaks to the shifting balance of power between center and periphery after Stalin. It was not Russia, but the Baltic states that took the lead in combating the “opiate of the masses” with new rites tailored to replace baptism, confirmation, and marriage. In 1957, an Uzbek Komsomol²⁷ chapter organized the first secular wedding, inspiring authorities in Leningrad to draft an official wedding rite for distribution across the Soviet Union. The new ritual called for an appropriately grand venue, and so a former nobleman’s mansion was requisitioned, with few modifications to the original aristocratic décor (other than the obligatory bust of Lenin).²⁸ The first

²⁶ Lane, C. (1981). *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society—the Soviet Case*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 34.

²⁷ All-Union Leninist Young Communist League, a quasi-independent youth division of Communist Party. Komsomol likely spearheaded the marriage rite movement as its membership demographic (14-28 year olds) encompassed the average age at first marriage across the republics.

²⁸ *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 27 October 1959.

wedding, held in 1959 on the forty-second anniversary of the October Revolution, met with global media coverage. A report from *Life Magazine* contrasts a “businesslike and perfunctory...old-fashioned Soviet marriage” in a drab registration office with a “modern palace marriage,” but doesn’t fail to point out the irony of the “czarist” setting for a progressive proletarian ritual.²⁹



3. Leningrad Wedding Palace, November 1959

Soviet officials clearly felt much the same concern, and architecture became central to the secular wedding initiative even before a Union-wide policy was established. A Russian-authored 1960 article for the American academic journal *Marriage and Family Living*, for example, describes the planned building campaign for new wedding palaces in Moscow, laying out an architectural design template in the process: “Marriage ceremonies will be

²⁹ “A ‘Marriage Palace’ in Leningrad,” *Life Magazine*, 18 January 1960, pp. 109.

conducted in the two-story buildings of modest design...This project envisages the wide application of reinforced concrete, mirror glass, and aluminum.”³⁰ In keeping with Khrushchev’s embrace of mass-produced modernism, the plan calls for “original and simple” interiors that make use of prefabricated materials, but also suggests such lavish touches as stained glass, fountains, allegorical statues, and chandeliers. The author describes how visitors proceed through the space according to the new ritual choreography, first entering a “spacious vestibule” overlooking a planted courtyard, continuing to a main hall (adjoined by a registration office, document repository, banqueting hall, and souvenir shop), moving upstairs to waiting rooms before entering the grand ceremonial hall (“150 sq. meters of floorspace”), and finally descending a wide staircase to a first floor banquet hall. This method not only created an appropriately theatrical atmosphere, but also allowed weddings to be conducted in an assembly-line fashion, with each party allotted a few minutes in each room before being ushered onwards.³¹

³⁰ Gribov, I. (1960). “Marriage Palaces in Moscow.” *Marriage and Family Living* 22(3), pp. 274.

³¹ For an account of a typical wedding palace ceremony in the early 1960s, see pages 48-53 of Loren Graham’s *Moscow Stories* (Indiana University Press, 2006).



4. 1960s wedding palace designs from Donetsk and Moscow

With wedding palace designs already circulating in the media, the party Central Committee's Ideological Commission began developing official policies to reduce participation in religious rituals. In 1963, the commission issued a resolution on "the more active introduction into the life of the Soviet people of non-religious holidays and rites," and instructed local soviets to construct "palaces of happiness."³² The wedding rite was the first of all the "life-cycle rituals" to be officially instituted, and was the most widely established across the Soviet republics. By 1970, only a decade after the first wedding palace opened in Leningrad, the Soviet Union was home to six hundred such institutions—but it was not nearly enough.³³ By the mid-1960s, the demand for ceremonies in a wedding palace (rather than a humble ZAGS) so far exceeded supply that only about one-third of couples could be accommodated. Wait lists could stretch for

³² Anderson, J. (1994). *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 48.

³³ Lane, C. (1981), pp. 75.

weeks—a not-unusual command economy failure that local officials began insisting was in fact an intentional measure to prevent hasty marriages and thus lower the divorce rate.³⁴ In Moscow, a wedding palace reservation required that the union be the first marriage for at least one of the partners.³⁵

³⁴ "Moscow Elopements Now Impossible." United Press International. *The Daily Tar Heel*, 19 May 1966, pp. 5.

³⁵ *Izvestiya*, 22 September 1973:5.

A Wedding Palace for Tbilisi

Georgia faced similarly daunting demand well into the 1970s, when the Department of Propaganda and Agitation initiated a campaign “against harmful traditions, customs, ceremonies, holidays, and the universal introduction of new – Soviet, socialist ones.”³⁶ By the time Eduard Shevardnadze rose to power as First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party in 1972, existing secular ritual institutions were woefully inadequate, with wedding palaces only in the cities of Tbilisi and Rustavi (neither of which had banquet halls). In the rest of the country, options for couples were limited to ZAGS and makeshift venues such as Houses of Culture, theaters, or sports facilities.³⁷ Party research revealed that one thousand couples held church weddings in 1974, but the director of the Tbilisi Palace of Marriage speculated that the number was even higher, as the majority of couples (3,000 - 4,000 per year) would also follow their legal ceremony at the Palace with a more traditional one at the historic Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in nearby Mtskheta.³⁸

And it was precisely this problem that Djorbenadze’s wedding palace for Tbilisi was intended to address. The Department of Agitation and Propaganda proposed a plan to “completely destroy the church’s plans to attract the youth

³⁶ Pogue Kaiser, C. (2015), pp. 239.

³⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 246.

³⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 247.

to its traditional ritual fuss,"³⁹ largely by creating its own traditional ritual fuss. In her research on late Soviet nation-building policies in Georgia, historian Claire Pogue Kaiser describes a proposed marriage rite for wedding palace ceremonies, which employs Georgian traditions (even variations on church wedding practices) to create a sense of cultural continuity:

The proposals for Sovietizing the traditional Georgian marriage ceremony included replacing the newlyweds' passing under a cross with passing under the "national" flag and state seal and encouraging them to wear national costumes...The Ministry of Culture was to print a special edition of Rustaveli's epic *vep'xistqaosani* (*The Knight in the Panther Skin*) to give as a gift from "Soviet power" to newlyweds at ZAGS or wedding palaces, along with the keys to their new apartment. Rustaveli's twelfth-century epic acts as a quasi-sacred text among Georgians, as it contains guidelines for chivalry, honor, hospitality, familial relations, and femininity, effectively canonized from the 1930s by Soviet nation-building policies. Bestowing a copy of this work with a set of apartment keys to a newlywed couple epitomizes the fusion of tradition and modernity sought by Soviet Georgian leadership in the 1960s and 1970s.⁴⁰

³⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 245.

⁴⁰ Pogue Kaiser, C. (2015), pp. 246-247.



5. Tbilisi Wedding House on Kamo Street (1967)

Tbilisi's main wedding registry was located on Kamo Street in the first floor of a late Stalin-era residential building, designed by architect Shota Kavlashvili.⁴¹ The modesty of the venue can be inferred from its Georgian title: a wedding "house" (*sakhli*) not a "palace" (*sasakhle*). After wedding legislation had been in place for about a decade, wedding palaces across the Soviet Union became municipal showpieces and part of local culture. This represents a marked shift from the original intentions of ritual policy under Khrushchev (who conceived of wedding palaces as a tool in his anti-religious campaign) to

⁴¹ The wedding house continues to function as a small events venue today, although the façade has been changed slightly to accommodate shops. Kavlashvili would go on to design Tbilisi's 1988 Archaeology Museum.

Brezhnev (whose developed socialism supported wedding palaces as public goods; their role in state atheism now secondary to their role in public culture). Wedding palaces of the 1970s and '80s were no longer the modest, mass-producible designs proposed in the 1960s. They increasingly represented original designs and appeared on postcards and tourism literature alongside other examples of local culture like historic monuments or ethnographic celebrations.



6. (clockwise from top left) late Soviet wedding palaces in Vilnius (1974), Kiev (1982), Bishkek (1987), and Tallinn (1988).

When Tbilisi began considering a wedding palace in the 1970s, the stakes had already been raised by examples across the Soviet Union. Any new building would have to become an instant icon: a premier institution that would proclaim Tbilisi's membership among other cultural capitals of the Soviet Union.

Ideally, that building would be accessible to locals and visitors alike, occupying prime real estate in central Tbilisi, where Soviet (and, increasingly, international) visitors flocked to marvel at its historic charms. Accordingly, Tbilisi's Palace of Rituals would have to balance bold new design with consideration for surrounding historic buildings—a challenge familiar to architects and preservationists today.

The Palace of Rituals project began in 1976, when architect Victor Jorbenadze was awarded a commission to create a grander alternative to the modest wedding registration office on Kamo Street. According to colleague Vazha Orbeladze, Jorbenadze was “gifted” the commission, although the municipal planning office held an official competition for show.⁴² Jorbenadze had previously worked on ritual architecture projects, and had established a reputation as both an innovative designer and respected scholar of Georgian architectural history.

Victor Jorbenadze's life spans almost the entire Soviet experience in Georgia: he was born 1925, only a few years after Georgia was incorporated into the Soviet Union, and died in 1999, as Georgia was still emerging from the post-Soviet chaos of independence. Jorbenadze enjoyed a privileged childhood with private tutors in music, German, and French, as his mother was one of the

⁴² Orbeladze, V. (2016). Interview by Angela Wheeler and Vladimer Shiozhvili. Tbilisi, 12 January 2016.

country's top obstetric physicians: a high-status position without as much ideological risk as, say, a top poet or bureaucrat. He avoided the draft while studying architecture at the Georgian Polytechnic Institute in Tbilisi from 1940-1946, and worked as a planner for the Ministry of Agriculture in his hometown of Samtredia before enrolling in the State Design Institute ("Giprogor") in Moscow from 1952-1956. Following an apprenticeship with Stalinist architect Mikhail Parusnikov, Jorbenadze returned to Tbilisi in 1957, working first as chief architect of Tbilisi's historic Kalinin district,⁴³ and then at the design and cost-estimation bureau of the Tbilisi executive committee. From 1959 he began work for the municipal planning and design workshop TbilQalaqProekt (Tbilisi City Project), where he spent the rest of his career.⁴⁴



7. Jorbenadze with actress Nato Vachnadze in the late 1950s-early 1960s

⁴³ Present-day Mtatsminda, Sololaki, and Rustaveli Avenue neighborhoods. These neighborhoods comprise Tbilisi's medieval core and the Russian Imperial-era center.

⁴⁴ Bostanashvili, D. (2013). *Butza: Victor Djorbenadze Architect*. Tbilisi, Cezanne Printing House, pp. 19

Known as a “number one dandy,”⁴⁵ Jorbenadze embodied the cosmopolitan spirit of the late Soviet period. He entertained a circle of major figures in Tbilisi’s cultural scene throughout his life, including actress Nato Vachnadze, artist Yuri Mechitov, and director Sergei Parajanov (with whom he was particularly close).⁴⁶ He took full advantage of the international windows opened by Khrushchev’s Thaw, reading widely on historic and contemporary architecture abroad, and visiting Germany and even India (apparently insisting that Soviet tourism officials change the route so he could attend a conference in Chandigarh and see Corbusier’s work).⁴⁷ He was also an ardent preservation advocate, traveling around Georgia and documenting historic architecture at his own expense. An article for the Union-wide architecture journal refers to his “famous” studies of tetraconch churches.⁴⁸

Jorbenadze expertly balanced Soviet and Georgian identities to his advantage: when writing on the medieval Georgian architectural ensemble at Mtskheta, he discussed the contribution of a hydroelectric dam’s Lenin statue;⁴⁹ when Tbilisi’s imperial-era city hall was threatened by a 1970s urban renewal scheme, he invoked its role as the setting of Georgia’s Bolshevik Revolution to

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 195

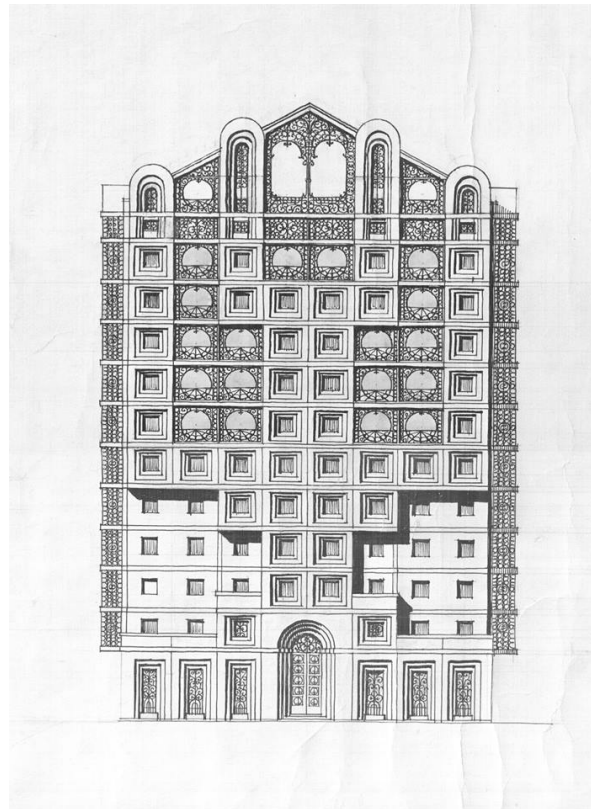
⁴⁶ Tsereteli, K. (1997). *Sergei Parajanov: Collage Against the Background of Self-Portrait—Life is a Play*. Nizhny Novgorod: Dekom, pp. 86-89.

⁴⁷ Orbeladze, Vazha. Interview by Angela Wheeler and Vladimer Shioshvili. Tbilisi, 12 January 2016.

⁴⁸ Hait, V. (1987). “Celebrations Palace in Tbilisi” *Arkitektura SSSR* [Architecture USSR] (4), pp. 42.

⁴⁹ Djorbenadze, V. (1958). “Architectural Scale of the Ensemble of Mtskheta, the First Capital of Georgia.” *Sabchota Khelovneba* [“Soviet Art”—in Georgian] (9).

justify its historical significance; when he wanted a new apartment, he asked City Hall if he might restore a former nobleman's house so as to instruct the proletariat on how the aristocracy lived before the Revolution—and he promptly moved in. He was dismissive of the “placeless,” mass-produced modernism that dominated Soviet architecture in the 1960s and early 1970s, joking that even he had been forced to build a *khrushchovka*.⁵⁰ Jorbenadze instead preferred to take historical context into account, a challenge he attempted to address in his early work.



8. Jorbenadze's early 1970s design for a dormitory at Tbilisi's Professional-Technical University.

⁵⁰ Nickname for the cheap, prefabricated three to five-story apartment buildings championed by Nikita Khrushchev as the solution to urban housing shortages.

Jorbenadze had an interest in the Soviet Union's new ritual architecture reaching back to the 1960s, when he collaborated on memorial complexes for Tbilisi's Kukia, Peter-Paul, and Dighomi cemeteries. This resume earned him his first independent commission: a memorial complex for the new Mukhatgverdi Cemetery, located along a ridge on the outskirts of Tbilisi. Rather than design one building, Jorbenadze designed four—an office, a water tower, a ceremonial hall, and a stonecutting workshop—arranged like follies in the hilly landscape. He drew on Le Corbusier's 1955 Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut, with its textured stucco walls and sculptural form, seeking to capture a different angle or element of the chapel in each building—earning him the nickname "Jorbusier" among his colleagues.⁵¹ Though small, the buildings provide an early glimpse of the forms Jorbenadze would later employ at the Palace of Rituals.

⁵¹ Orbeladze, Vazha. Interview by Angela Wheeler and Vladimer Shioshvili. Tbilisi, 12 January 2016.



9. Jorbenadze's Mukhatgverdi buildings and elements of Le Corbusier's Notre Dame du Haut

While completing the Mukhatgverdi complex 1974, Jorbenadze was awarded another commission for a small literary museum in the provincial town of Kvareli. Originally planned as an extension onto national poet Ilia Chavchavadze's birthplace, Jorbenadze pushed for a freestanding museum, hoping both to preserve the historic structure and to fully realize his creative

ambitions.⁵² Working with architectural historian and designer Keto Kobakhidze, he designed another small stucco building that reflects the Corbusian influence found at Mukhatgverdi, but also experiments with other elements that would appear later at the Palace of Rituals, like stained glass and a spiraling tower.



10. The Ilia Chavchavadze Museum in Kvareli

Jorbenadze had, in fact, come up with his idea for the Wedding Palace in 1970, encouraged by Sergei Parajanov.⁵³ The exterior was inspired by Erich Mendelsohn's Einstein Tower (1921), Rudolf Steiner's the Goetheanum (1924-1928) and the Boiler House in Dornach (1913-1915), and Le Corbusier's Notre Dame du Haut (1955).⁵⁴ But it also incorporated elements of ecclesiastical

⁵² Kobakhidze, Keto. Interview by Angela Wheeler and Vladimer Shioshvili. Tbilisi, 13 January 2016.

⁵³ Bostanashvili, D. (2013), pp. 151.

⁵⁴ Bostanashvili, S. (1985). "Palace of Rituals of Tbilisi." *Sabchota Khelovneba* ["Soviet Art"] (8).

architecture: a bell tower, stained glass, frescoes, and an altar. Eduard Shevardnadze, the recently-appointed First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, took special interest in promoting Georgian arts and culture and personally endorsed the project.⁵⁵ When the municipal planning committee brought up concerns that the building evoked religious imagery, Jorbenadze freely admitted his goal was to produce a “cathedral”—creating a minor uproar quelled by Shevardnadze himself, who argued: “we, the communists, study a lot from history, and particularly the history which overcame all the difficulties of time, and the church is such an institution; people do like churches, and if this is the point, it will add a positive merit to a modern building.”⁵⁶



11. International influences for the Palace exterior: Rudolf Steiner’s Boiler House (1915), Erich Mendelsohn’s Einstein Tower (1921), Le Corbusier’s Notre Dame du Haut (1955)

⁵⁵ Zurab Nijaradze. Interview by Angela Wheeler and Vladimer Shioshvili. 15 January 2016.

⁵⁶ Bostanashvili, D. (2013), pp. 141.

The Palace of Rituals was a project of mutual benefit to the architect and to the party secretary. Shevardnadze instituted a municipal holiday called Tbilisoba in October 1979, creating a modern-day harvest festival that celebrated Tbilisi culture and heritage. The same ritual campaign that produced wedding palaces also produced these new holidays, which were intended to provide secular alternatives for local saints' days and other religious holidays. In an interesting rhetorical move, Soviet Georgian propagandists claimed that by reinstituting religious holidays as secular celebrations, they were in fact re-appropriating ancient, authentically Georgian traditions that had been "hijacked" by the Church.⁵⁷ Architecture was a major component of Tbilisoba, which was held in Old Tbilisi, the city's historic quarter. In preparation, party authorities commissioned restorations of old buildings and called for new buildings to be premiered as a showcase of the city's architectural innovation. Shevardnadze intended the Palace of Rituals to be the centerpiece of Tbilisoba 1984, and was determined to provide Jorbenadze with whatever materials and expertise necessary to make the project sufficiently impressive.

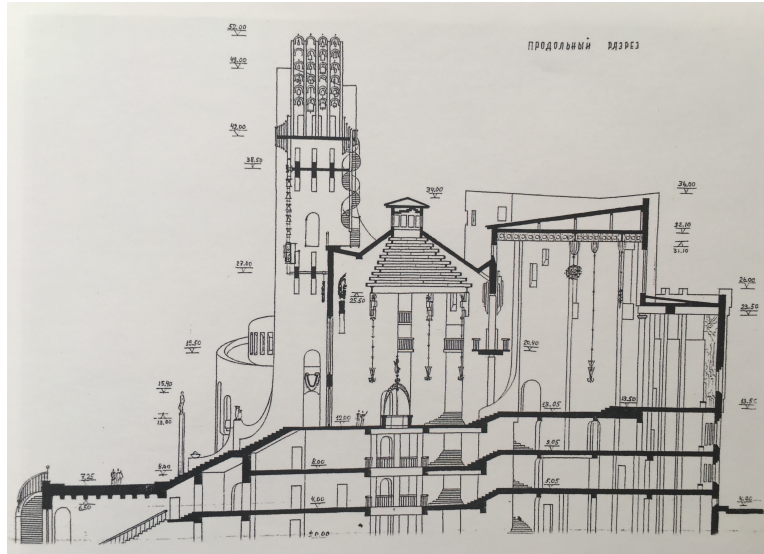
With support from the highest party authorities, Jorbenadze began refining his ambitious design. The Palace was originally intended to occupy the

⁵⁷ Pogue Kaiser, C. (2015), pp. 244.

corner of a park in Vake, a well-heeled residential district, but other architects objected to construction in a park space, even for a cultural institution.⁵⁸ Vake Park was also located a considerable distance from the medieval core of Tbilisi. A new site was selected atop a ridge along the banks of the Mtkvari River, commanding a panorama of the city's historic neighborhoods and ensuring that the palace would be visible from all directions. The change in site prompted a change in design: now set into a slope rather than a flat grade, Jorbenadze was able to increase the number of floors and arrange a cascade of terraces descending from the entrance, substantially increasing the scale of the project. From the Wedding Palace, the terraces afforded a panoramic view across the river to Old Tbilisi; from Old Tbilisi, the terraces created an illusion of even greater height for a building that already dominated the embankment.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Orbeladze, Vazha. Interview by Angela Wheeler and Vladimer Shiozhvili. Tbilisi, 12 January 2016.

⁵⁹ See appendix 1 for the approved embankment site plan



12. Wedding Palace section (east) with additional two floors and terrace

The project was plagued by considerable delays—in part due to the change in scale and site; in part due to the material requirements of Jorbenadze’s design, which was not conducive to prefabricated components.⁶⁰ Jorbenadze was also frustrated by repeated official attempts to justify the size of the building by cluttering his ceremonial spaces with restaurants and shops.⁶¹ Ultimately, the politician and the architect both got their way: Shevardnadze had his grand opening on Tbilisoba 1984 with a mass wedding and traditional dance celebrations (even if the interior was not quite finished), while Jorbenadze had the honor of designing a wedding palace of unprecedented scale and design detail.

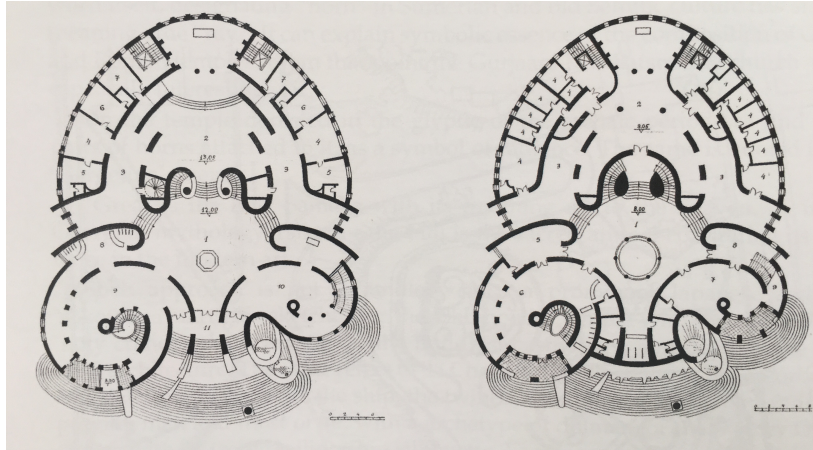
⁶⁰ Project collaborator Vazha Orbeladze witnessed a heated exchange between Jorbenadze and Shevardnadze, when Jorbenadze attributed construction delays to lack of lead sheeting to seal the roof. After offering to put some lead between Jorbenadze’s eyes, Shevardnadze managed to procure a sufficient quantity leftover from the construction of a lead-lined fallout shelter beneath Tbilisi’s parliament building.

⁶¹ Bostanashvili, D. (2013), pp. 141.



13. Shevardnadze at the Palace grand opening, Tbilisoba 1984

Like its expressionist inspirations, the Palace of Rituals is abstract, sculptural, and blatantly suggestive. Jorbenadze provides hints (and winks) for the viewer, deriving the building's form from the male and female elements that were to be united within. What is, from the ground, a phallic bell tower rising between two spiraling pavilions becomes, from above, a model of the female reproductive system—Jorbenadze lifted the plan from the medical diagrams used by his mother, a prominent gynecologist. The Palace's asymmetry provides another indirect reference to its ritual purpose: like a couple standing side by side, the western (male) half of the façade is both taller and wider, while the eastern (female) half is slightly shorter and more subdued.



14. Palace of Rituals floor plans

Despite inspiration derived from imported architectural styles, the exterior is laden with subtle reference to Georgian architectural tradition. Towering over the low-rise buildings that surround it, the Palace is of a scale and prominence historically accorded to Georgian Orthodox cathedrals (imagery that would not have escaped the architect, preoccupied with Georgia's medieval architectural ensembles throughout his career). Jorbenadze also succeeded in cladding the exterior entirely in limestone panels from the central Georgian town of Kutaisi, rather than the stucco used in his previous projects. The stone produces a warmer effect with slight variations in color, as in a traditional Georgian church. Last used widely for grandiose Stalinist civic architecture, stone veneer had been denounced as a form of "architectural excess" in the 1960s and was replaced by the more efficient, proletarian precast concrete. To revive the use of stone again in the 1980s, and for such a large building with

curving elements, suggests a certain confidence in the significance of the Palace as a civic institution—and provides the viewer with a suggestion of the aesthetic “excesses” that await inside.

The exterior of the Wedding Palace is a model of restraint compared to the interior, a colorful medley of references to Georgian tradition executed by a team of applied artists under Jorbenadze’s direction: designer Vazha Orbeladze, architect Erekle Mkervalishvili, engineer Givi Pitskhelauri, sculptor Gia Japaridze, and painters Zurab Nijaradze and Nino Lordkipanidze. Inside, the allusions to Georgian tradition are no longer hidden in abstract forms or choice of materials; they appear in their entirety, creating a postmodern collage set in flowing interior spaces. Visitors encounter an advance guard at the entrance: a statue of Dionysus drawn from a West Georgian archaeological specimen occupies a tall pedestal to the right of the steps. Frequently misidentified as Hermaphrodite,⁶² Dionysus was chosen for his associations with the purposes of the Wedding Palace: ritual, celebration, fertility, and spectacle (also: viticulture, the ancient tradition of which is central to Georgian culture—and weddings).

⁶² Perhaps in connection to Jorbenadze’s unconfirmed sexuality.



15. Ceremonial hall

The open plan interior uses curving walls to lead the visitor to new spaces rather than to distinct rooms. The plan is arranged around a central axis connecting the entrance and the “altar” at the back, with spaces to the left and right for male and female wedding guests to prepare for the ceremony. At the center of the axis, a “well” opens to the floors below, looking down on the banquet halls and registration offices, and establishing a visual and spatial connection between levels. The well (since filled in) was crowned with a bronze Tree of Life sculpture, designed by sculptor Gia Japaridze, based on images from a medieval mosaic in Pitsunda, a town on the Black Sea coast – now part of the Abkhazian separatist region.⁶³ Architectural historian David Bostanashvili compared the arrangement of space to that of a town square, in which small

⁶³ See appendix 3-6 for images of historical references in the palace interior.

peripheral streets converge on a central plaza.⁶⁴ The visitor enters a soaring interior space illuminated throughout with jewel-toned stained glass panels designed by Vazha Orbeladze. Here, the use of stained glass draws not on ecclesiastical architecture (Orthodox churches do not traditionally feature stained glass), but on the multicultural architecture of Old Tbilisi.⁶⁵ Another element of secular Georgian architecture directly above: the *darbazi*, a pyramidal vault (here rendered in gold-hued steel girders rather than the traditional wood) with origins in the ancient architecture of the South Caucasus.

Moving towards the altar, the visitor passes below a mezzanine and ascends a small staircase to a spacious chamber where the wedding party (and perhaps musicians) would assemble. Although most of the walls were kept white or lined in stone, two columns at either side are decorated with frescoes of the Western zodiac and constellations, rendered in muted pastel colors by painter Nino Lordkipanidze. The plan culminates at the altar, a space demarcated by another low flight of steps, lowered ceiling, and a pair of columns. Couples were intended to pass between the columns and into a more intimate space suffused with color. Another mural by Zurab Nijaradze covers every surface with serene blues and greens as it depicts a wedding scene (into which Jorbenadze has

⁶⁴ Bostanashvili, D. (2014). Index 0144 - Palace of Rituals. *Index*. Tbilisi, ArtareaTV.

⁶⁵ *mashrabiya*, a wood latticework panel lined with stained glass, was likely introduced to Tbilisi (then Tiflis) under Qajar rule. Originally a residential feature, *mashrabiya* became a staple of the Orientalist eclectic style employed at late 19th century civic institutions of Russian Imperial Tiflis.

cheekily inserted himself as a lion-headed patron offering a miniature Wedding Palace, as ancient Georgian kings might be depicted offering miniature churches). At the center of this vestibule is an unassuming table of white stone: the registration desk, the Soviet Union's answer to the Orthodox altar.

An interview of the Palace director, Elza Svimonishvili, reveals the extent of the institution's efforts to incorporate Georgian identity as a key aspect of wedding ceremonies. Svimonishvili states that her staff worked with local academic institutions to study "old folk customs" that could be revived with "renewed essence."⁶⁶ Ceremonies could include a *shvidkatsa*⁶⁷, or men's folk choir, and Svimonishvili refers to the presentation of the epic poem *Vepkhvistqaosani* (Knight in the Panther's Skin) as a wedding tradition "since time immemorial."⁶⁸ Efforts to highlight Georgian culture were intended to make ceremonies of all kinds more "warm and comradely" and less "formalistic," like the bureaucratic civil registration office procedures.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Nebieridze, G. (1985). "A Whole Lifetime Together." *Partiuli Sitqva* [The Party Word] (12), pp. 19.

⁶⁷ Lit. "seven-man," an arrangement that could accommodate Georgia's famous traditional vocal polyphony.

⁶⁸ Claire Pogue Kaiser's research would imply that this was actually a recently-developed ritual. Traditionally, excerpts from the epic poem would have been recited at the wedding feast rather than presented as a book.

⁶⁹ Nebieridze, G. (1985), pp. 21.



16. View through the well up into the ceremonial hall

Although wedding ceremonies were the highlight of the project's agenda, the Palace of Rituals was extensively programmed by party officials to serve multiple leisure and social welfare functions. The spaces below the main ceremonial hall included "a discotheque, book and gift shops, various public eating facilities, lecture halls, consultation offices, [and] halls for fashion" reflecting an emphasis on "collective youth leisure" typical of developed socialism.⁷⁰ Svimonishvili also mentions plans for extensive social services: marriage counseling, matchmaking, child psychology for new parents, and even

⁷⁰ Hait, V. (1987). "Celebrations Palace in Tbilisi" *Arkhitectura SSSR* [Architecture USSR] (4), pp. 41.

sexology in an effort to “overcome entrenched superstitions.”⁷¹ The palace staff established (or planned to establish) “close working relations with New Traditions Inculcation Centre of the Georgian SSR Academy of Sciences, the Applied Sociology Department of Tbilisi State University, the Psychological Institute of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, the Republican Sexology Centre, and the ministries of health and culture.”⁷²

Taken as a whole, the Palace of Rituals speaks to developed socialism’s interest in promoting quality of life through a constellation of methods: national pride, cultured leisure, and social welfare services. The extensive programs on offer indicate that Soviet wedding palaces evolved under developed socialism to offer far more than just participation in secular ideology. Couples were also increasingly encouraged to participate in national ideology, celebrating a dual Georgian-Soviet identity.

⁷¹ Nebieridze, G. (1985), pp. 20.

⁷² Norakidze, N. (1984). “Here Happiness is Celebrated.” *Komunisti* [The Communist]. Tbilisi, pp. 296.

2.

The Palace as Dialogue:

Architecture Old and New in the Late Soviet Era

In the service of a secular political project, architect Victor Jorbenadze filled the Palace of Rituals with quotations from Georgian architectural vocabulary, ensuring a sense of cultural continuity for the ceremonies that would take place within. The result is as Georgian as it is Soviet, both emerging from and reacting to the international modernism of previous decades. The comparative artistic freedom of developed socialism, coupled with its encouragement of national culture, fostered what architectural historians are beginning to identify as a late socialist postmodernism. Official Soviet architectural discourse hesitated to embrace a trend seen as inherently capitalist, unsettled by the ideological implications (and potential professional consequences). Only in 1979 did the major party architecture journal address the possibility of postmodernism in the Soviet context. By that time, architects like Jorbenadze, particularly those on the periphery, had been experimenting with postmodernism (in practice if not in name) for years.

Developed socialism had, in many ways, provided the conditions for a distinctive Soviet postmodernism. Most notably, developed socialism's emphasis upon culture as a state-provided public good meant local tradition and geographical place and now had official and explicit roles to play in socialist

governance. Historic preservation, accordingly, acquired a fresh legitimacy among urban planners and architects, expanding the acceptable range of architectural expression.

This chapter will examine how the Palace of Rituals embodies a late socialist postmodernism, and how the cultural logic of the period created conditions for this architectural phenomenon to flourish. Critical reception of the Palace of Rituals provides a revealing portal into the concerns of late Soviet architects, who increasingly worked on both preservation and contemporary projects. The Palace was primarily discussed as a matter of what preservationists today might refer to as “infill design,” or the sensitive incorporation of new architecture into historic environments. This growing sensitivity to historic context indicates that preserving old buildings encouraged architects to reconsider the design of new ones.

“An Era-Defining Building”

The Palace of Rituals and Soviet Preservation Discourse

The Palace of Rituals was the subject of much debate in Georgian and Union-wide press for much of the 1980s. How the Palace was discussed was often just as revealing as what was discussed. Articles appeared in art, architecture, and literary journals, indicating that robust architectural criticism in this period was not confined to the architectural community, but was broadly intellectual.⁷³ The Palace was frequently compared to other national cultural products like literature and film, suggesting a shift in the public perception of architecture and how it was evaluated. For much of the 1950s and '60s, architecture had been treated as a branch of the planning and construction industry, but by the late Soviet period, it was considered an art form capable of expressing national identity as effectively as a film or a poem. By the 1980s, the “success” of a building was also increasingly tied to its ability to be in dialogue with the existing built environment, a dramatic break from the ideology of modern architecture, which was valued precisely for its departure from local vernacular.

⁷³ Major reviews of the Palace appeared in Union-wide journals *Tvorchestvo* (Creativity) and *Arkhitektura SSSR* (Architecture USSR), and Georgian journals *Sabchota Khelovneba* (Soviet Art), *Literaturuli Saqartvelo* (Literary Georgia), and *Partiuli Sitqva* (The Party Word).

Much of the discourse around the Palace reflected a new cultural current among the Soviet elite: historic preservation. The rising value of historic architecture embodied a reversal of Khrushchev's modernism, which favored prefabrication, "functionalism," and a commitment to avoiding the historically-inflected "excesses" of Stalinist architecture. This ideology treated architectural design as a science rather than as an art. Its primary function was, quite literally, to "modernize": to improve standards of living by replacing outdated buildings with practical, rational new ones. Khrushchev himself was rumored to be dismissive of historic preservation: on a visit to Trakai Castle in Lithuania, he was overheard complaining of the "waste of money" lavished on restoring an old building with no practical use.⁷⁴

Art historian Boris Groys claims that before developed socialism's abandonment of utopia and encouragement of national cultures, "the Soviet population had to be constantly on the move, constantly mobilized, inspired, and oriented toward utopian ideals. It had no right to stop, to relax, to look toward the past."⁷⁵ After decades of marching towards the future, developed socialism finally provided official permission to engage deeply with history, including historic architecture. According to historian Catriona Kelly, "it is

⁷⁴ Meierovich, M. (2004). *I Have a Dream*. Yaroslavl: Aleksandr Rutman, pp. 177.

⁷⁵ Groys, B. (2003). "The Other Gaze: Russian Unofficial Art's View of the Soviet World" *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art Under Late Socialism*, ed. A. Erjavec. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 58.

difficult to overstate just what a turning point the Brezhnev era represented with regard to...historic buildings in the aesthetic hierarchy of the Russian intelligentsia.”⁷⁶ Although the past was still recruited to the Soviet cause, by the late 1960s, it had become acceptable to study history for history’s sake, without explicit ideological motivation. The active revival of “regional studies”⁷⁷ turned central Soviet authorities into unlikely patrons of culture on the periphery, commissioning regional intellectuals to produce “multivolume national histories, invented national genealogies, purified national languages, [and] preserved national treasures.”⁷⁸

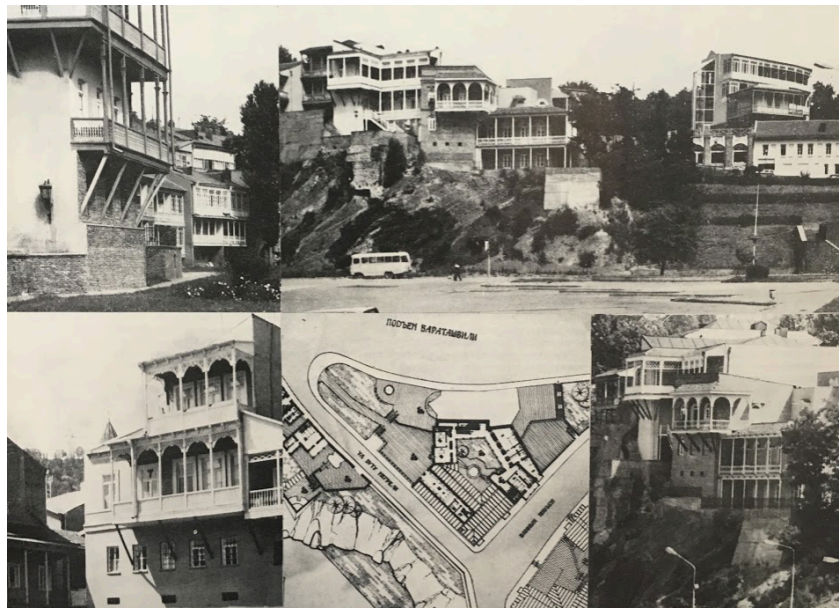
Georgia was at the forefront of the Soviet preservation movement, with a cultural influence that punched far above its demographic and economic weight. In 1959, Georgia was the first Soviet republic to form a voluntary national society dedicated to the protection of monuments—several years ahead of the next societies in Azerbaijan (1962) and Armenia (1964), marking the Caucasus as a leader in Soviet preservation, with Georgia leading the Caucasus. Most of the other republics, including Russia, didn’t establish equivalent societies until

⁷⁶ Kelly, C. (2013). “From ‘Counter-Revolutionary Monuments’ to ‘National Heritage’: the Preservation of Leningrad Churches, 1964-1982.” *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 1(54), pp. 133.

⁷⁷ In Russian, *kraevedenie*, see Kelly pp. 134.

⁷⁸ Slezkine, Y. (1994). “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism.” *Slavic Review* 53(2), pp. 451.

1966.⁷⁹ The preservation of Old Tbilisi (initiated by Shevardnadze's inaugural Tbilisoba in 1979) was covered extensively in *Arkhitektura SSSR*, the main party architecture journal, more than any other individual city in the Union.⁸⁰ This preservation impulse not only protected historic buildings, but influenced the design of new ones.



17. Illustration from one of many articles on the restoration of Old Tbilisi published in *Arkhitektura SSSR*.

The growing attention to historic buildings fostered concern regarding the impact of new buildings on their historic surroundings. Georgian architects

⁷⁹ Polevogo, V., ed. (1986). *The Popular Art Encyclopedia*. Moscow: Soviet Encyclopedia.
<http://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enc_pictures/2287/Общества>

⁸⁰ *Arkhitektura SSSR* ran articles on historic Tbilisi restoration projects in December 1976, February 1980, June 1981, July-August 1982, April 1983, September-October 1984, November-December 1984, March-April 1985, May-June 1985, January-February 1986, July-August 1986, November-December 1986, May-June 1987, May-June 1989, and March-April 1990.

of the period were often commissioned to work on preservation projects and new designs simultaneously—Vazha Orbeladze, for example, was engaged at the municipal workshop for the restoration of Old Tbilisi for the duration of the Palace of Rituals project.⁸¹ Architectural design and discourse of the period reflect the growing acceptance of tradition as something to be celebrated rather than discarded.

This paradigm shift is evident in the critical reception of the Palace of Rituals, which reveal sensitivity to historic context as a key factor in evaluating the success of a new building—a consideration that would have been unheard of under Khrushchev. Initial reviews of the Palace were mixed, and it was hotly debated in the local press throughout its construction.⁸² Critique centered around three themes: how the palace responded to its historic context, how it articulated Georgian traditions, and how it reflected a new era in Soviet architecture.

Architect Shota Bostanashvili was the first to defend the Palace in a major local journal, *Sabchota Kheloveneba* (Soviet Art) in 1985. Like Jorbenadze, Bostanashvili's work explored the possibilities of historically-inflected

⁸¹ Orbeladze, Vazha. Interview by Angela Wheeler and Vladimer Shiozhvili. Tbilisi, 12 January 2016.

⁸² Orbeladze, Vazha. Interview by Angela Wheeler and Vladimer Shiozhvili. Tbilisi, 12 January 2016.

architecture in the late Soviet period.⁸³ Bostanashvili emphasizes that the Palace, as a “temple of modern social function” has the responsibility to shape both social and architectural traditions, unlike a mere registration office, which can only provide social services.⁸⁴ The Palace’s architecture, in a way, becomes its own kind of social service: continuing the traditions of Georgian architecture in an innovative way.

In 1987, two articles in a local literary journal continue the debate with a question that would not be unfamiliar to preservationists today: is the Palace an heir to Georgian architectural heritage, or does it go too far, and constitute an intrusion on the surrounding historic environment? In his article “On One Public Building,” Lado Vardosanidze dismisses Bostanashvili’s arguments as “pathos” and reminds readers of the “architectural truth” that major public buildings should be held to a certain set of criteria. Rather than immortal truths, however, these criteria reflect recent developments in Soviet architectural discourse: “placement, place in the city’s planning structure, conformity to surrounding relief, linkage with the environment, role in the overall silhouette of development, ability to organize space, and scale.”⁸⁵ Although these critics differed in their assessment of the Wedding Palace, they shared an unspoken

⁸³ Jorbenadze would review Bostanashvili’s National Bread Factory in the May-June 1990 issue of *Arkhitektura SSSR*.

⁸⁴ Bostanashvili, S. (1985). “Palace of Rituals of Tbilisi.” *Sabchota Khelovneba* [Soviet Art] (8).

⁸⁵ Vardosanidze, L. (1987). “On One Public Building.” *Literaturuli Sakartvelo* [Literary Georgia].

new assumption: buildings should be assessed, in part, by the extent to which they were sensitive to their historic context. Such considerations, unheard of in Soviet architectural criticism only a decade earlier, underscore the dramatic shift at work in both architectural practice and public perception of architecture's role.

Vardosanidze goes on to use preservation-based arguments against the Palace of Rituals, recognizing the 1980s as a "new stage of cultural heritage protection when the value of historical cities has at last become axiomatic." He emphasizes that the Palace is located "not just any place for Tbilisi," but a unique historic environment "whose silhouette makes Tbilisians' hearts beat in a different way ...whose image stays unforgettably with all foreign guests." The Palace, he argues, "rubs against" that silhouette. His primary complaint is the "gigantomania" of the building, which he believes departs from Old Tbilisi's human scale—a Jane Jacobean argument one might expect to hear from a Western preservationist or New Urbanist rather than a Soviet architectural critic. Vardosanidze concedes that new buildings are necessary to breathe life into a city, and condemns the mindset that would leave Tbilisi "a monument to its own past, where only tourists seeking the exotic feel comfortable." He ultimately concludes, however, that the Palace does not participate rigorously in the

“dialectical struggle between old and new that must accompany the development of architecture.”

The next issue of *Literaturuli Saqartvelo* featured a response by architect Vakhtang Davitaia, who defends the Palace of Rituals and dismisses Vardosanidze’s claims that a “permanently defined Tbilisi scale” can even be said to exist. He exhorts Vardosanidze (and the reader) to look at the Palace as part of a broader “culturological” phenomenon rather than as merely a building.⁸⁶ Davitaia situates Jorbenadze’s work within a kind of late Soviet Georgian cultural canon that also includes recent works of national literature and film,⁸⁷ bringing architecture back into the realm of national expression. The Palace of Rituals, he contends, is about more than just trying to accommodate heritage; it is about creating a new heritage for Georgia and for humanity.⁸⁸ Davitaia accuses Vardosanidze of taking too literal a stance on design, stating that the building achieves continuity with Georgian tradition through “deep layers of memories and associations” rather than through imitation of historical scale and composition.

⁸⁶ Davitaia, V. (1987). “On One Public Building: Response.” *Literaturuli Sakartvelo* [Literary Georgia] (9).

⁸⁷ He cites work by filmmaker Tengiz Abuladze and authors Otari Chiladze, Nodar Dumbadze, and Chabua Amirejibi, among others.

⁸⁸ By way of qualifying his expertise about world heritage, Davitaia mentions his recent attendance at a UNESCO symposium in Prague dedicated to issues of “art integration in historic cities,” and his visits to France and Japan.

A detailed review of the building in *Arkhitektura SSSR* by Vladimir Hait also lavishes praise on Jorbenadze's ability to incorporate innovative work within historic contexts, citing his early projects as "one of the first attempts in Soviet architecture to tactically inscribe a new building onto the existing urban environment."⁸⁹ Hait views the Palace as part of a new class of highly individual buildings that reinterpret regional traditions and "inspire such broad and active public interest in the regeneration of the historical development of the centre." Hait clarifies that these new buildings do not meekly blend in with or imitate the stylistic characteristics of historic architecture, but reinvent them.

Whether critics liked the Palace of Rituals or not, all agreed that it embodied an emerging movement in architecture. Even Lado Vardosanidze conceded that the Palace was "an era-defining building in Georgian architecture"—curiously, he did not view the Palace as an acceptable heir to Georgian tradition, but his description suggests he imagines its primary identity as Georgian, not Soviet or even "contemporary."⁹⁰ Although Hait emphasizes the originality of the Palace's design, he also recognizes it as "characteristic and symptomatic of the current stage of development of Soviet architecture as a whole."⁹¹ In a coda to Hait's article, a Georgian architect Davitashvili

⁸⁹ Hait, V. (1987). "Celebrations Palace in Tbilisi" *Arkhitektura SSSR* [Architecture USSR] (4), pp. 42.

⁹⁰ Vardosanidze, L. (1987).

⁹¹ Hait, V. (1987), pp. 44.

acknowledged that at times this Soviet architecture resembled its Western counterparts, but emphasized it emerged from “a different tradition, different taste, different ideals, a different spirit and a different culture.”⁹² Soviet critics clearly recognized that the architecture of the period converged formally with the trend of postmodernism in the West, but also understood that in the Soviet world, the style had arisen from different dynamics and served different purposes.

⁹² Davitashvili, G. (1987). “Celebrations Palace in Tbilisi.” *Arkhitektura SSSR* [Architecture USSR] (4), pp. 45.

3.

The Palace as Legacy:

Breaking Down Binaries in Post-Soviet Preservation

Historic preservation in Georgia is widely perceived to be in a state of crisis, with proposed UNESCO sites languishing on the Tentative List and existing UNESCO sites added to the World Heritage Sites in Danger.⁹³ This state of affairs emerges from three trends at work in post-Soviet Georgia that coalesced under the Saakashvili administration that came to power in 2003. All three trends represent efforts to disown the Soviet past and create an urban space that conforms to Georgia's newly-constructed national image. The first of these efforts are "restoration" projects that often reduce historic neighborhoods to pastiche showpieces. The second is the commissioning of massive public buildings designed by foreign architects with scant regard for surrounding historic architecture. The third effort is the erasure of Soviet-era architecture, which conforms to neither the idealized pre-Soviet past nor the glamorized post-Soviet future. And so although Georgia continues to face the same challenges architects debated in the 1980s (how to innovate while respecting tradition, how to preserve without lapsing into pastiche) the country is now doing so without the benefit of the conversation Soviet architects started three decades ago. The

⁹³ "Tbilisi Historic District." UNESCO World Heritage Convention Bureau of the World Heritage Committee. Proc. of 25th Extraordinary Session: Evaluations of Cultural Properties (7-8 December 2001) Finland, Helsinki. 86-90.

collapse of the Soviet Union cut short that debate, and architectural discourse has yet to recover.

The late Soviet architecture that embodies this productive conversation about tradition and innovation faces its own preservation challenges. Preserving architecture of the recent past is difficult even when the recent past is uncomplicated—at best, it is fraught with issues of public taste and personal bias. In post-Soviet Georgia, which is staking its current and future identity on breaking with the Soviet past, deep cultural ambivalence is also an obstacle to preservation. Institutions like the Palace of Rituals, designed to serve certain political aims, face redundancy when the regime that produced them disappears. The chapter will survey the afterlife of late Soviet architecture in Georgia and prospects for its preservation.

Georgia declared independence from the Soviet Union in April 1991, heaving into a period of political and economic turmoil that effectively froze the local architectural profession for a decade. The 1990s saw the emergence of a “wild market” as state property was haphazardly privatized, and a laissez faire planning ethos derived in part from political instability and in part from zealous embrace of the free market.⁹⁴ At the same time, Georgia struggled to establish a new national identity that broke with the Soviet past, a project that had dramatic implications for both new and historic architecture.

After the wild experiments of late Soviet postmodernism, Georgia in the 1990s sought safer, more traditional architecture that recalled the pre-Soviet past. Post-Soviet Georgia provided an early hint of its disinterest in innovation with the 1990 national cathedral competition.⁹⁵ The resurgent Georgian Orthodox Church sought to create a new religious center in the capital city to symbolize its revival following decades of Soviet suppression. Historically, Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in the neighboring city of Mtskheta functioned as the

⁹⁴ Ziegler, K. (2009). “The Evolution of Spatial Planning in Georgia from Socialism to Market Economy.” K. Van Assche, et al (eds.), *City Culture and City Planning in Tbilisi: Where East and West Meet*. Lewiston: Mellen Press, pp. 141–142.

⁹⁵ A competition initially announced before independence in May 1989 to commemorate 1500 years of Georgian Orthodox autocephaly.

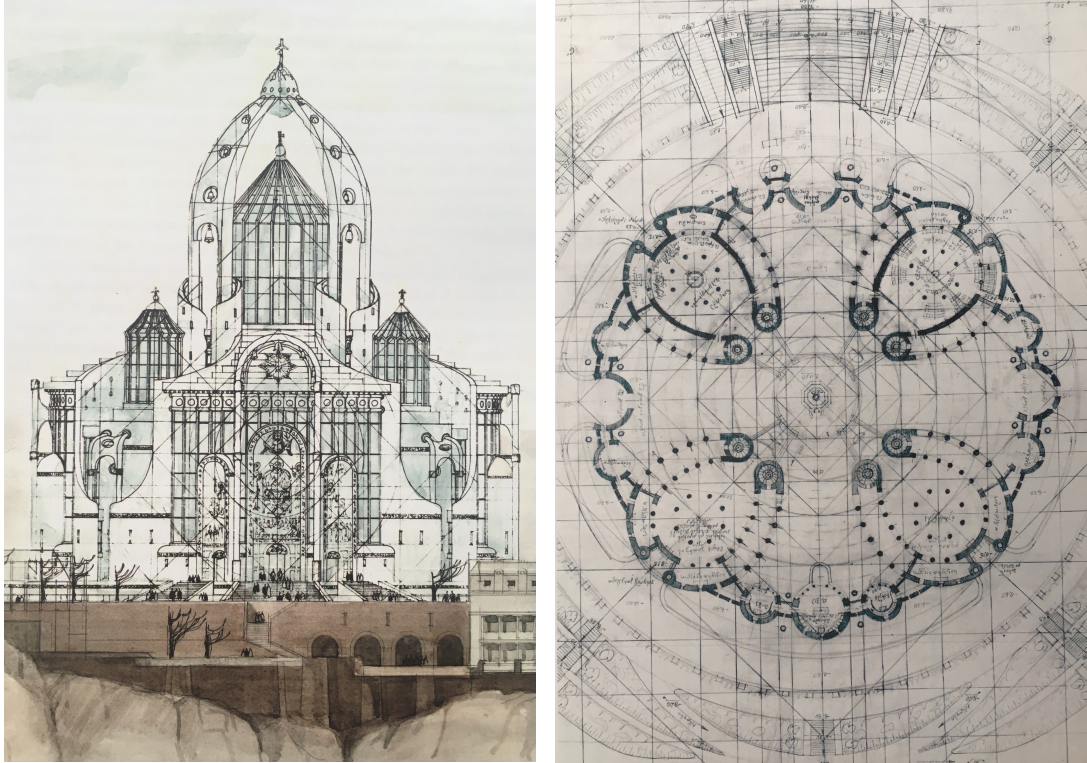
seat of Patriarchate and center of Georgian Orthodoxy. Jorbenadze had studied Mtskheta extensively from the 1950s, even publishing an academic article on the role of its church ensemble in the landscape.⁹⁶ Jorbenadze and Shota Kavlashvili⁹⁷ submitted a proposal entitled “Resurrection – Unity,” a clear reference to the Georgian state as much as to the Church. The competition entry describes Jorbenadze’s consideration of “the existing situation in the country, the great importance of consolidation of the Georgian nation, in the spirit of Georgians striving for restoration of the integrity of their country”⁹⁸ and his efforts to create continuity with Church tradition. The floor plan was based on his studies of Georgian tetraconch⁹⁹ churches, and would center on a reliquary from Svetitskhoveli, symbolizing the new cathedral’s connection to its historical predecessor. The site, located not far from the Palace of Rituals, would enable a dialogue between the two buildings. Jorbenadze’s magnum opus, a cathedral that would synthesize decades of research on Georgian ecclesiastical architecture with modern materials and idioms, symbolized a newly-resurrected Church ready to face the future.

⁹⁶ Jorbenadze, V. (1958). “Architectural Scale of the Ensemble of Mtskheta, the First Capital of Georgia.” *Sabchota Khelovneba* [Soviet Art] (9).

⁹⁷ Lead preservationist for the 1980s restoration of Old Tbilisi and architect of the 1988 Archaeology Museum

⁹⁸ Bostanashvili, D. (2013), pp. 111.

⁹⁹ From the Greek “four shells;” a Byzantine four-apsed church almost entirely endemic to the Caucasus and Syria



18. "Resurrection—Unity" proposal for Sameba Holy Trinity Cathedral in Tbilisi by V. Jorbenadze and Sh. Kavlashvili (1990)

The Church had other ideas. Despite over one hundred applications submitted in the first round of competition, the Church announced no winner. Nodar Mgaloblishvili, chair of the Union of Architects of Georgia, sent a glowing letter of support for the proposal to Georgian Patriarch Illia II, imploring His Holiness and Beatitude to consider "the development of the modern Georgian church by reviewing and using Georgian historical principles and new architectural means."¹⁰⁰ But innovative combinations of old and new were no longer as appealing as simple revival of the old. Delayed by economic and

¹⁰⁰ Bostanashvili, D. (2013). *Butza: Victor Djorbenadze Architect*. Tbilisi: Cezanne Printing House, pp. 114.

political turmoil in the 1990s, the Church finally selected a proposal from Archil Mindiashvili, who created a composite of traditional Georgian Orthodox elements, topped it in gold, and blew it up to skyscraper proportions. Ironically, Jorbenadze was able to get a “cathedral” approved by Soviet authorities—but not by the Georgian Orthodox Church, which sought a more conservative design. He died in 1999, suffering from dementia and emphysema.



19. Sameba Holy Trinity Cathedral (completed 2004); architect Archil Mindiashvili

In 2003, the “Rose Revolution” brought the young, pro-West United National Movement to power, led by Mikheil Saakashvili, who promised transparency and a clean break from the chaos of the 1990s. The Saakashvili administration recognized the power of architecture to convey ideological narratives: in this case, the story of Georgia as an outpost of democracy emerging from the shadow of Russian influence, ripe for international investment

and Western integration. To bolster the appearance of a Georgian economic miracle both at home and abroad, the Saakashvili government undertook a nationwide beautification campaign that rested upon glamorous new architecture (often designed by foreign architects), and the restoration of historic neighborhoods. Caught between a romanticized pre-Soviet past and an exciting globalized future, Soviet architecture occupied an uncomfortable (and politically undesirable) middle ground. The decaying material world inherited from the Soviet Union was seen as an embarrassing hindrance to a fledgling democracy courting foreign capital.

Under the aegis of modernization, Soviet architecture was regularly “beautified” out of the urban landscape—a fate not uncommon to architecture of the recent past dismissed as outdated but not yet recognized as historic. This phenomenon is perhaps most clearly articulated by two buildings in central Telavi, a provincial capital in eastern Georgia. At one corner of Telavi’s central plaza lies the Telavi State Drama Theatre, completed in 1967 by the prolific Georgian architect Giorgi Jabua. On the plaza’s adjacent corner stands a five-story residential complex added in 1969, originally sporting tiered balconies in a modernist idiom. In 2012, both structures were reclad, but inflected with differing historical implications. The theatre façade was “updated” with white metal pipes and panels, while the apartment building was artificially aged with

faux historic wooden balconies and a stone veneer foundation. Although the resulting structures were now wrapped in styles separated by more than a century, both buildings had fallen victim to the same campaign.



20. Telavi central square drama theater and apartment complex (left) and after 2012 beautification (right)

The arbitrary nature of the methods used to beautify Soviet architecture suggests that the flaw Georgian officials saw in the victims of their architectural makeover was not merely age. Not only were the existing buildings of rather recent vintage, but they were frequently made to appear older—not younger—than their actual age. Rather, the buildings' sin was their birth under the Soviet Union. They were functionally useful but politically obsolete. Such restoration

plays well in a country where the Soviet Union has been recast as an occupying regime in a new national narrative. These restorations, however, ignore the fact that Soviet architecture in Georgia is just as Georgian as romanticized Old Tbilisi balconies: designed by local architects and, by the 1970s, often designed to reflect Georgian traditions.

Saakashvili's beautification mandate created a muddled preservation agenda in Old Tbilisi, encompassing the historic neighborhoods surrounding the Palace of Rituals. Eager to create an historic core resembling those found in western European capitals, Tbilisi City Hall embarked on a campaign that could best be described as retrofitting the past to serve the needs of a desired future. The UNESCO-designated historic districts of major European cities have several attributes that appealed to a Westward-looking political administration: cleanliness, prestige, revenue-generation, and architectural embodiment of national identity. Municipal leaders determined to remake Old Tbilisi in this image, failing to take into account the long-term social, political, and financial organization that created the appropriate conditions for West European historic districts to flourish.¹⁰¹

The resulting "New Life for Old Tbilisi" plan, implemented in 2009, revealed the shortcomings of a municipal government in thrall to pastiche

¹⁰¹ Gerkeuli, N. (2010). "National Urban Policy in Georgia." *Big Cities, Capitals and City-Regions in Central and Eastern Europe*. Soos G. and Temmes M. (eds.) NISPAcee Press, 51-64.

European Olde-Towne branding and content to leave responsibility for historic neighborhoods entirely in the hands of the private sector.¹⁰² The only committee to oversee “New Life” work, a parity council, was composed mainly of the developers and municipal officials rather than planners or heritage professionals, and so little attention was paid to selecting appropriate preservation approaches for each site. At many of the “New Life” sites, historic buildings were not usually preserved, but demolished and reconstructed (often with an extra floor or two), creating a “Potemkin village” effect.



21. “Old Tbilisi Revival” near Betlemi Quarter

¹⁰² Archuadze, Z. (2012). “New Life of Old Tbilisi.” In *International Conference: Community and Historic Environment, Tbilisi, 20-22 September 2011, 21-23*. Tbilisi: ICOMOS Georgia.
<http://icomos.org.ge/pdf/conference_proceedings.pdf>

Rather than producing an appealing environment for tourists and potential business tenants, the lack of informal social space results in a landscape too sterile and incoherent to attract pedestrians. Candy colors and clean lines, it seems, are a poor substitute for even the long-neglected public spaces of unrestored historic neighborhoods. As anthropologist Paul Manning has observed, emphasis on façades alone leads to pastiche architecture, in which traditional idioms are folklorized and theatricalized, detached from their original social meanings and reduced to symbols of the “Old Tbilisi” brand—a brand that was exported across Georgia and applied as a one-size-fits-all image for other historic cities across the country.¹⁰³ It could be said, then, that the “New Life” scheme replaced Old Tbilisi with “Old Tbilisi Revival,” a twenty-first century pastiche that reimagines nineteenth century urbanity, with only the most superficial concessions to traditional forms.

¹⁰³ Manning, P. (2009) “The City of Balconies: Elite Politics and the Changing Semiotics of the Post-Socialist Cityscape.” *City Culture and City Planning in Tbilisi: Where Europe and Asia Meet*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, pp 17-55.



22. Variations on a theme (clockwise from top left) Mtskheta, Telavi, Tbilisi, Signaghi

Another challenge to historic preservation in Georgia comes from new architecture, commissioned by both private and public sources. The Saakashvili administration was particularly enthusiastic about investment in flagship projects that constitute what Georgian planner Joseph Salukvadze refers to as “neoliberal urban entrepreneurialism” in which showpiece public buildings designed by international architects function as “a quick fix in achieving a modernized and globalized image for the capital and, by implication, in linking the whole nation to the ‘European civilization.’”¹⁰⁴ Dozens of these projects, including the Bridge of Peace (2010, designed by Michele de Lucchi), the Public

¹⁰⁴ Salukvadze, J. and O. Golubchikov (2016). “City as a Geopolitics: Tbilisi, Georgia—a Globalizing Metropolis in a Turbulent Region.” *Cities* (52), pp. 49.

Service Hall, and Rike Park Theater (2012 and 2016, both by Massimiliano Fuksas) were sited in historic neighborhoods, with little consideration for their impact on what Vardosanidze called “the scale, ratio and silhouette of Tbilisi, which developed over the centuries.”¹⁰⁵ International architecture firms, with no knowledge of Tbilisi or of Georgia’s historic architecture, were invited to litter projects across the country.

It is easy to blame foreign architects for vanity projects heedless of local context, but much of the problem is also domestic. Ironically, there is less professional architectural discourse in Georgia under the free market than under socialism. The market has not (and likely can not) provided a replacement for the centralized structure and funding that supported architectural publications, education, accreditation, and symposia across a massive population. The loss of the Soviet Union also meant the loss of a broader architectural community. Although far more open to global influences, an architect in Georgia today lacks the structure with which to engage in collective professional debate about developments in Russia, Tajikistan, and Estonia. The fall of the Iron Curtain has, in some ways, made the Georgian architectural profession more insular. Architecture associations are currently voluntary and serve no regulatory

¹⁰⁵ Vardosanidze, L. (1987). “On One Public Building.” *Literaturuli Sakartvelo* [Literary Georgia].

purpose. The Association of Architects of Georgia publishes Style Magazine,¹⁰⁶ but the content is dominated by advertising and sponsored articles rather than the in-depth discussion of contemporary developments like those found in Soviet-era journals. A local architect refers to local organizations as “absolutely impotent...in terms of significance or influence in the professional field.”¹⁰⁷

Georgia’s current penchant for the extremes of pastiche historic architecture and decontextualized new architecture suggest an inability to explore the methods pioneered by late Soviet architects. While the Soviet period was primarily additive in terms of architecture (creating entirely new districts from scratch on the outskirts of the city, like Saburtalo), the free market is proving transformative, inserting development into preexisting neighborhoods. These new buildings may be bold and new, but they rarely face the challenge of engaging historic architecture in innovative ways.

¹⁰⁶ <<http://style-magazine.archias.ge/?l=E&m=1>>

¹⁰⁷ Zhvania, Irakli. Interview by Angela Wheeler. 9 May 2016.

Afterlives of Late Soviet Architecture

There is currently no unanimity on the treatment of late Soviet architecture in Georgia. Although the overall landscape is grim, there are some outstanding exceptions, and a rising interest among younger generations and international visitors in Soviet architecture.

The 1975 Ministry of Roads by Giorgi Chakhava is an example of promising developments for the protection of late Soviet architecture. An early example of late socialist postmodernism, the building was lauded across the Soviet Union and internationally: it combined El Lissitzky's horizontal skyscrapers with Japanese metabolic architecture and drew inspiration from the way Georgian mountain villages set into hillsides. The Ministry was abandoned and defaced for much of the 1990s and 2000s, until it was acquired by the Bank of Georgia in 2007 (when it was also declared an Immovable Monument under the National Monuments Act). The Bank of Georgia completed a full renovation and conversion to their national headquarters in 2011; imagery of the building now features prominently in bank advertising.

Jorbenadze's 1975 Mukhatgverdi cemetery buildings are now in an advanced state of ruin even though the cemetery is still in regular use. The buildings no longer have utilities and are used primarily as storage sheds partially open to the elements and full of trash or maintenance equipment. All

suffer extensive water damage. The funeral services company that leases the site recently covered the former stone-carving workshop in stucco for improved insulation. The relative isolation of the site on the outskirts of Tbilisi mean it is relatively unknown and unlikely to be restored or designated. Jorbenadze's Chavchavadze Museum, however, remains much as it was in 1979, and functions as a tourist attraction for the area.

Shota Kavlashvili's 1988 Archaeology Museum was only partially completed, with the remaining extensions left derelict. The building constituted a financial burden for the Georgian National Museum, so it is currently in private hands and used to store archaeological materials from various projects (even though the main building is reaching an advanced state of deterioration and cannot provide stable storage conditions). Other minor projects face similar fates: a 1988 dental clinic built on historic Leselidze Street as part of its reconstruction in the 1980s (by architects N. Kvateladze and G. Takaishvili) was demolished in 2014. The 1990 National Bread Bakery located near Tbilisi reservoir (by architects Davitaia and Sh. Bostanashvili) is currently derelict, and (like Mukhatgverdi) is likely too obscure and isolated to spark a preservation campaign.

The Palace of Rituals continued to operate in the wake of Georgian independence—it even hosted a vow renewal ceremony for Deep Purple

frontman Ian Gillian during a 1990 tour,¹⁰⁸ and dated photographs from the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia indicate that the Palace was in use as late as 1998. Badri Patarkatsishvili, a Tbilisi-born tycoon who amassed a multibillion-dollar fortune during the privatization of the Soviet economy, purchased the defunct Palace from municipal authorities for an undisclosed sum in 2002. We may never know what initially attracted the oligarch to the towering phallic structure, but his treatment of the Palace is indicative of the cultural ambivalence late Soviet architecture prompts in post-Soviet Georgians.

Patarkatsishvili left the exterior largely unchanged, but converting what was once a public institution into a private residence required considerable interior modifications. Patarkatsishvili initially contacted Jorbenadze's original collaborators, Vazha Orbeladze and Givi Pitskhelauri, to lead the adaptive reuse process. He also hired painter Zurab Nijaradze to restore the damaged altar mural.¹⁰⁹ The lower floors (formerly offices and banquet halls) were converted to residential space, while the main ceremonial hall was to be left intact for social functions. Against the protests of Orbeladze, Patarkatsishvili required that the central "well" connecting all four floors be sealed and Japaridze's "Spring of Life" sculpture removed, as they presented obstacles to his plan for a concert

¹⁰⁸ "Deep Purple lead singer's Georgian wedding: Ian Gillan in Chokha and Phaeton." *Georgian Journal*, 20 March 2013 <<http://www.georgianjournal.ge/entertainment/22685-deep-purple-lead-singers-georgian-wedding-ian-gillan-in-chokha-and-phaeton.html>>

¹⁰⁹ Nijaradze, Z. (2016). Interview by Angela Wheeler and Vladimer Shioshvili. Tbilisi, 15 January 2016.

hall. Orbeladze suggested at least relocating the sculpture, and drew up plans to incorporate it into the garden, but Patarkatsishvili was not interested.

Offended, Orbeladze quit the project, leaving Patarkatsishvili to hire local architect Gia Kinkladze (who was not part of the Palace's original design team) for the conversion.¹¹⁰ Kinkladze made several modifications to the ceremonial hall's interior: replacing the white stone floor with multicolored tile, installing doors to entryways originally left open, and exchanging original metal hardware for ornate woodwork. Although the overall impression is largely preserved, the clean, interconnected spaces Jorbenadze carefully planned are somewhat cluttered by the new additions.

Badri Patarkatsishvili died suddenly in 2008, leaving his estate frozen as various claimants battled for his six billion dollar fortune.¹¹¹ In 2013, the Palace was leased to an events management company, which reopened it as a "celebration multifunctional complex for the guests with refined taste and the followers of high standards."¹¹² Although the grounds remain closed to the general public, the Palace of Rituals once again hosts weddings—in addition to birthdays, corporate functions, fundraisers, and the Black Sea Neurosurgical Congress. Given the resurgence of Georgian Orthodox Christianity after

¹¹⁰ Gersamia, T. (2014). *Vazha Orbeladze: Architecture, Design, Painting, Graphics*. Tbilisi: Magticom, pp. 15-16.

¹¹¹ Parfitt, Tom. "Obituary: Badri Patarkatsishvili." *The Guardian*, 14 February 2008.

¹¹² <<http://www.ritualebissasakhle.ge/page/about>>

independence, however, most Georgian couples prefer a traditional church wedding, rendering Soviet wedding palaces redundant.¹¹³

But the most interesting of Patarkatsishvili's modifications is hidden from view: a mock Old Tbilisi courtyard occupying one of the lower residential floors and intended to evoke Patarkatsishvili's childhood home. Candy-colored wooden balconies festooned with carpets overlook a courtyard (illuminated from above by a steel-framed glass pyramid reaching for I.M. Pei) complete with a stone fountain, street lamps, and a Morris column plastered with vintage advertisements. In the end, even the Palace of Rituals could not escape Old Tbilisi pastiche.



23. Old Tbilisi revival meets late Soviet postmodernism

¹¹³ According to national survey by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 82% of Georgians self-identified as Orthodox Christians in 2015 <<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2015ge/RELIGION/>>

Conclusion

Preserving late Soviet architecture possesses a value beyond preserving individual buildings, because architecture of this era embodies an under-utilized strategy of preservation itself. Soviet architects in the 1970s and, with greater intensity, the 1980s, began exploring how new structures themselves might contribute to the existing architectural heritage while still producing innovative designs. The collapse of the Soviet Union disrupted that process. The subsequent chaos and restructuring of the architectural profession around the private market shut the door on this approach to historic environments. But by preserving the legacy of late Soviet architecture, we might be able to resume that discussion, to the benefit of both old and new architecture in Georgia.

Image Sources

1. Collection of Irakli Kovzanadze
2. Author screenshots taken from Dziga Vertov's "Man With a Movie Camera"
3. Life Magazine, Time Inc. Photographer Carl Mydans
4. Donetsk 1973 postcard courtesy delcampe.net; Moscow 1961 drawing courtesy Cleveland Press Reference Department
5. National Parliamentary Library of Georgia
6. delcampe.net
7. Collection of Irakli Kovzanadze
8. Collection of Irakli Kovzanadze
9. Photographs of Notre Dame du Haut courtesy Wikimedia Commons; photographs of Mukhatgverdi by Vladimer Shioshvili
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17. Arkhitektura SSSR November-December 1986 courtesy Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library at Columbia University
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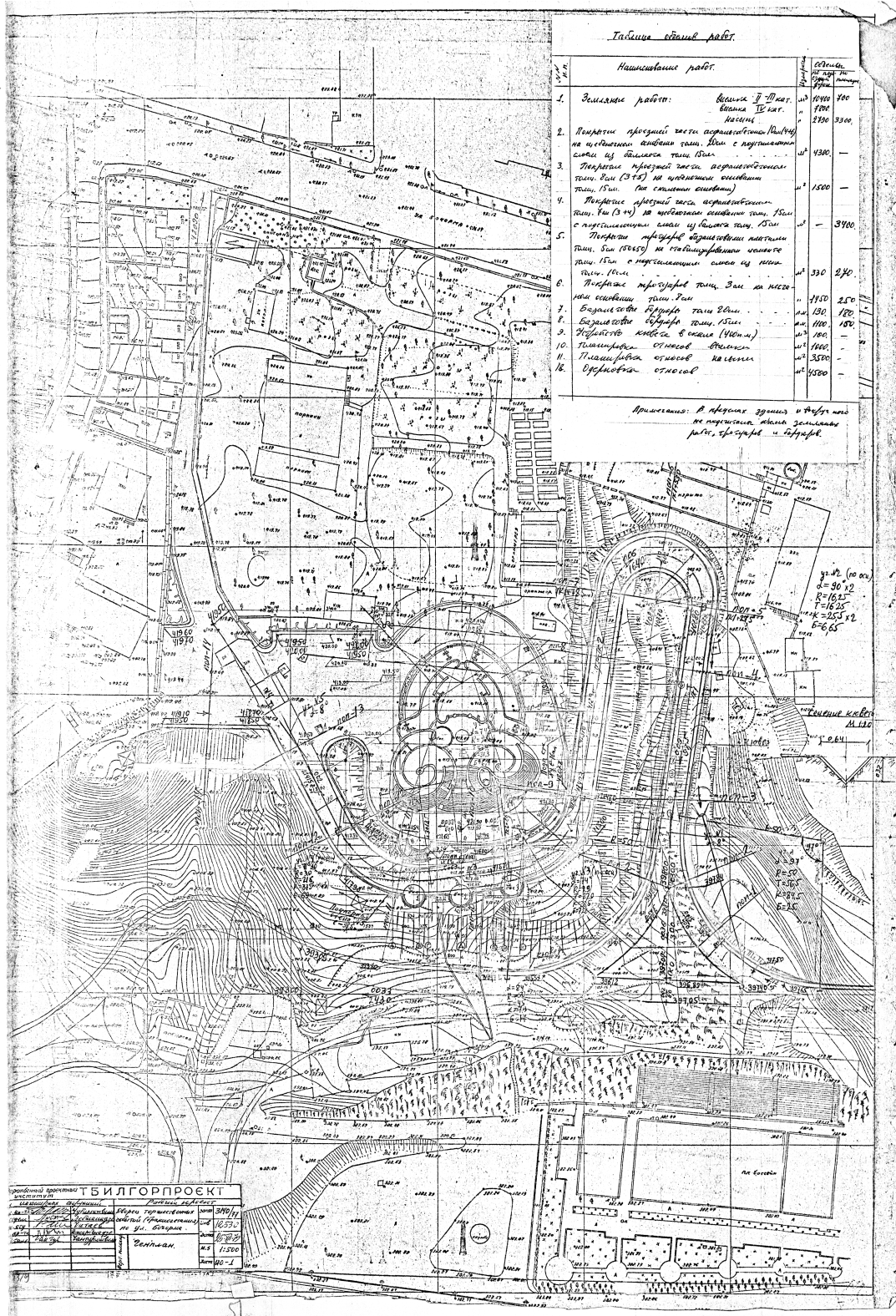
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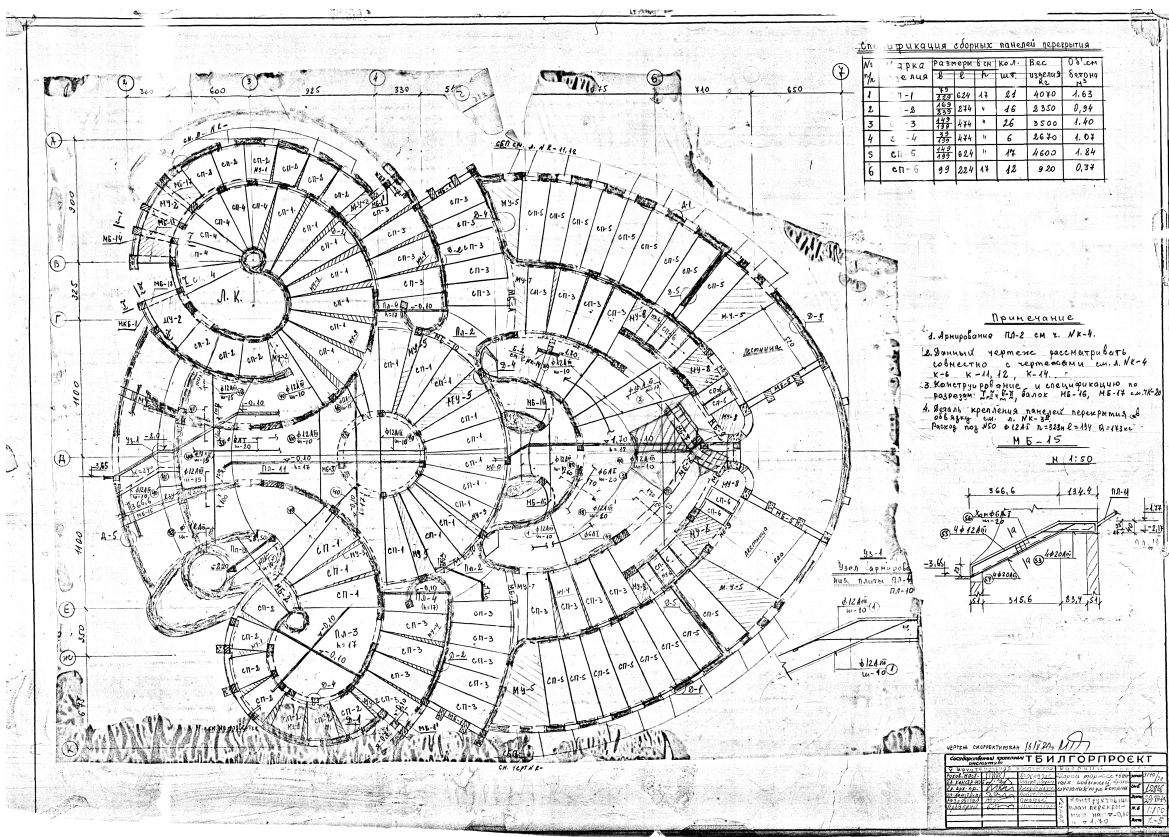
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Appendix



1. Palace of Rituals site plan. Image courtesy The National Archives of Georgia.

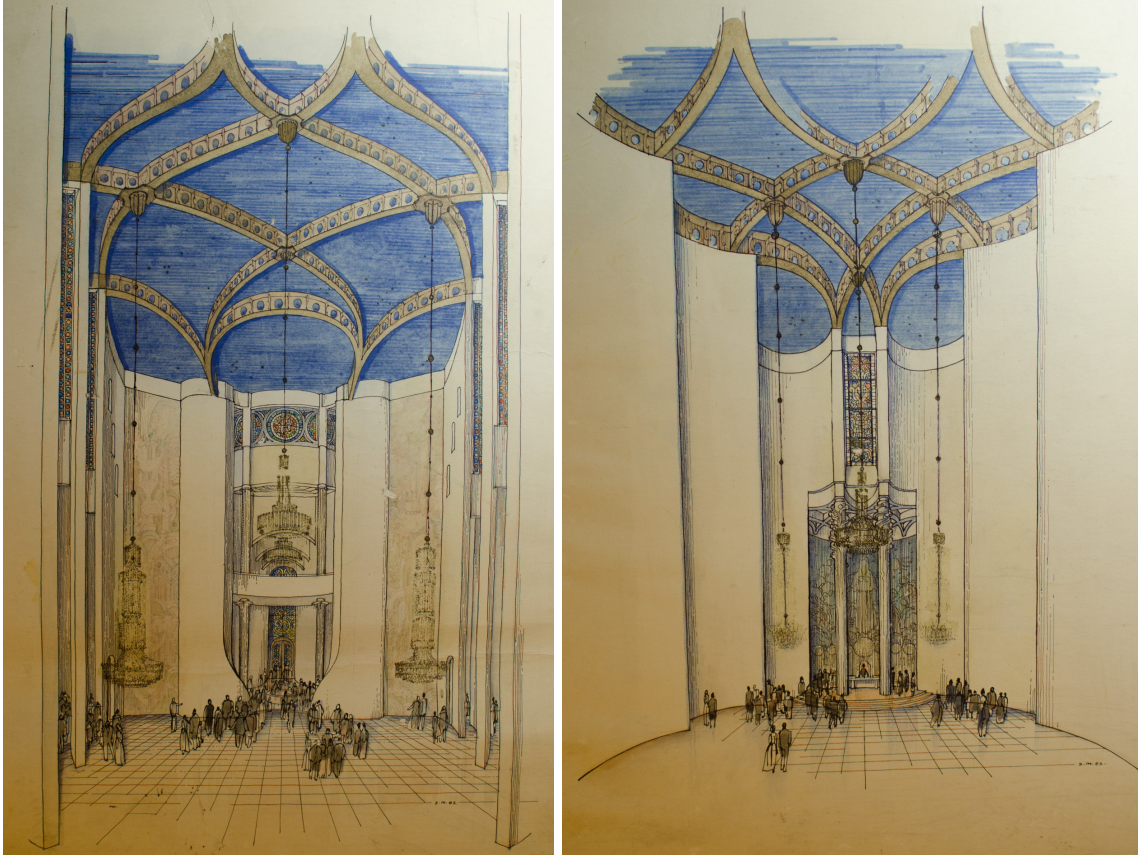




4. 4th century mosaic from Pitsunda, Abkhazia inspired Japaridze's "Tree of Life" sculpture. The mosaics were discovered in the 1950s and excavated through the 1970s.



5. A fresco by Zurab Nijaradze depicts Jorbenadze as a lion-headed figure offering a model of the Wedding Palace in a style that refers to Georgian iconography, most likely David the Builder. The connection is literal (David the Builder, Jorbenadze the architect) and symbolic (David the Builder is viewed as having ushered in Georgia's cultural golden age in the 11th century).



6. Sketches by Vazha Orbeladze show potential interior variations for the altar